MERIDIANS:
MAPPING METAPHORS OF MIXED RACE IDENTITY

By

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by

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This book is dedicated to the Spirits of Peace and Love.

May they be the foundation of all our knowing and all our being.

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PREFACE

"I've been reading memoirs," I announced to my mother, "which has me thinking about the possibility of marrying literary criticism with life, mine specifically. Like so many others producing scholarship in gender and race studies, I want my work to be valuable to those outside the academy. I want to convince people my book is worth their time, despite their question of 'Why would I want to read literary criticism?'"

"That would be my question," my mother confessed. "Why *would* I want to read it?"

Indeed, why would she? Having previously pondered the usefulness of my work, the possibility for praxis to accompany theory, I was stumped by my mother's question.

Because you're my mother, of course, I thought wryly. *You'd want to read it because you're proud of everything I accomplish . . .*

This was a shallow and narcissistic response, I knew. Why would my mother, or any other intelligent and thoughtful person with a limited amount of time, want to choose my book out of a limitless number of others? And what would it offer of practical value toward social change?

Instead of attempting to give a definitive answer to my mother's question—a question that, I suppose, an individual can answer only for herself—I offer something I tell my students when they wonder why they should read the works we study in class: literature illuminates life. And when we subject literature to theoretical scrutiny, we can switch on the bulbs of knowledge and simultaneously shed light on our own cultural and

personal experiences. In literature and in literary criticism, we find new ways in which to pose questions, to seek answers, and to see the world. We can engage the hypothetical. We can reflect on gritty reality. We can tease out memories. We can explore the truths of myth. We can acquisition space in which to mine our own knowledge, giving us new possibilities for being in the world and being in relation to others.

Instead of answering my mother's question, then, I will tell you what this book is about so that you can answer for yourself . . .

This is a book about race and real lives, gender and generations, traditions and travel, love and language, borders and belonging, metaphors and maps, books and bodies. This is a book about the twentieth century and today. This is a book about literature and about life.

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Abstract of Dissertation Presented to the Graduate School
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Chair: Tace Hedrick
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Although mixed race identity traditionally has been equated with conflict, the conflict is not necessarily lived but may be more accurately viewed as a conflict of language, a conflict of metaphors. Traditionally, metaphors of mixed race identity have reflected notions of opposition and hierarchy; at the same time, mixed race individuals have searched for utopian spaces in which conflict and tragedy are alleviated and race is imagined as a unifying, rather than divisive, idea. This study looks at the treatment of mixed race women in twentieth century novels, beginning with Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1925) and then jumping to the end of the century—to Fran Ross's *Oreo* (1975), Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), and Jenoyne Adams's *Resurrecting Mingus* (2001)—to study texts written during and after the Black Power Movement. It begins with an analysis of metaphors of blackness and whiteness that developed in the nineteenth century and then questions the ways these metaphors have traditionally complicated possibilities for mixed race identity, resulting in replications of the tragic mulatto and adherence to the one-drop

rule. Subsequently, the analysis moves to contemporary metaphors of mixed race identity to explore their limits and possibilities and the ways in which these metaphors are implicated by questions of gender. The texts under analysis respond to the same set of problems, including the longing for utopian spaces of wholeness and harmony within mixed race identities and non-traditional families. Additionally, these texts contain a latent struggle over questions of history, family, and racial identity. They long to articulate utopian visions while they are confined within the historical moments and literary formulas in which they were written, and they struggle to negotiate postmodern questions of identity, self, wholeness, and harmony—both individual and communal—while bound by literary and social conventions that resist the utopian visions they hope to articulate. Each text attempts to envision utopian social, political, familial and individual spaces where the "play" of identity—the possibility of negotiation and individualization—may be manifested, utopian visions of harmony may be realized, and new metaphors may be articulated.

CHAPTER 1
CARTOGRAPHIES OF RACIAL IDENTITY

Intimate Cartography

I want to show you a map and tell you a secret. The map looks like this: I'm a woman with skin the color of cattails in the sunshine. My hair is dark brown, soft, thick, and willfully curled. My eyes are brown—not a honey-colored brown but a deep brown, yet not so dark that my pupils are indistinguishable from my irises. Of course, none of this comprises the secret, for none of this is hidden information; it is all readily apparent on my body. The secret is this: I am not a black woman; I am a black woman; I am not a white woman; I am a white woman.

Of course, this sounds paradoxical, impossible, but the metaphors of black and white are often only meagerly and superficially—sometimes not even superficially—related to actual bodies. My sense of myself as both black and white and as neither black nor white comes from my own understanding and perception of my body as well as understandings and perceptions that go beyond it. Additionally, the perceptions of others become crucial in these perceptions of myself. For instance, when I am among strangers, I assume that their first perceptions of me involve the color of my skin, the texture and style of my hair, the codes of my gender. Although I do not consider myself a black woman, I must recognize that this will be the way many others perceive me. In contrast, when I was married to a white man or when I visit my white mother, I function as part of a family and culture to which outside observers would claim I do not belong

and yet in which I feel un-contestably at home, although I do not consider myself a white woman.

My body, then, like that of any other person, is implicated by what Debra Walker King has called body fictions: our "externally defined identities and representations as bodies." These body fictions result in the "collision between real bodies and an unfriendly informant: a fictional double whose aim is to mask individuality and mute the voice of personal agency" (vii). The body becomes a map with a very peculiar geography, one that attempts to impose identity, to pinpoint contours and demarcate lines of latitude and longitude, in an effort to describe and contain realities that are multidimensional within the two-dimensional realm of black and white. If the body can be seen as a map, then what we call that body is an indication of our navigation, of our interpretation, of the map. Thus it is that the map of the body becomes an important reference point in locating identity. Although most people forget to look beyond its limited dimensions and thereby assume the map is totalizing, the body is not an exclusive means of mapping identity.

The body, indisputably important, is still a limited and contradictory map, subject to metaphors that function unevenly—allowing, for example, a light-skinned woman to be called black but typically not allowing a dark-skinned woman to be called white. It is with these contradictions and uneven metaphors of race in mind that I begin this exploration of metaphors of mixed race identity. In so doing, I seek to draw a more accurate map of mixed race identity—or at least one that acknowledges the limits of its dimensions—a map that can direct new explorations of these identities and chart the geography of my being a not-black/not-white woman.

Mapping Past Paths and New Directions

Werner Sollors has catalogued in intricate detail the history of miscegenation and mixed race characters in American literature. His comprehensive study *Neither Black Nor White* offers a thematic analysis of interracial literature, which he defines as "all genres that represent love and family relations involving black-white couples, biracial individuals, their descendants, and their larger kin" (3). Identifying common tropes throughout interracial literature—such as reference to the curse of Ham, fractions of blood, and fingernails as racial signs, among others—Sollors concludes that interracial literature is most often themed "for a black-white *contrast* of 'either/or' than for an interracial realm of 'neither, nor, both, and in-between'" (*Neither* 10). In this instance, Sollors highlights an important question for current discussions of mixed race identity in American literature: how are individuals of mixed race represented, as a site where races unite or as a site where they collide?

Mixed race characters have long been a subject of interest to black and white authors alike, and there have been numerous arguments made to explain the origins of this interest in pre-Civil War and antebellum fiction. To pre-Civil War Northern audiences, the tragic mulatto or tragic octoroon was "a perfect object for tearful sympathy combined with moral indignation" (Zanger 285). Yet the use of the tragic mulatto by antislavery writers also has been seen as an indication of racial prejudice since such writers may have found the plight of a near-white character more tragic than that of one more phenotypically black. Although it has been argued that these authors focused on characters of mixed race in order to highlight the tragic nature of slavery and/or make their characters more likely to generate sympathy from white readers, it is more

compelling to argue that these writers sought to highlight generations of white patriarchal guilt through the use of mixed race characters. On an even more symbolic level, "miscegenation and the 'unnatural' treatment of biracial offspring [may] conveniently stand for the South's real sins: the prostitution of an entire race of black bodies for the gratification of the white man's 'lust' for wealth and power and the resultant violation of those 'family ties' traditionally associated with the Christian notion of the brotherhood of man" (Clark 294). Conversely, Simone Vauthier argues that "interest in the white Negro may be read as an imaginary testing of boundaries. The white Negro represents a *cas limite*, the smallest difference that marks the point where the Other turns into the Same, when the either/or disjunction is no longer operative" (349).

Countless other scholars, as well, have approached the topic of mixed race literature in hopes of identifying and analyzing themes such as those detailed above. Most often, scholars turn to discussions of the tragic mulatto and passing in order to highlight the constructedness of race and facilitate arguments about its lack of basis in biology. In fact, Sollors seeks to investigate the themes of mixed race literature in order to comprehend "the cultural operations which make [races] seem natural or self-evident categories" (*Neither* 3). Similarly, Naomi Zack notes that miscegenation "can be viewed as a recurrent trope in popular fiction, a sort of metaphor for the unblended part of the melting pot of American society as a whole; the problems of all black Americans in white American culture; or the alienation of the modern individual in general. Characters of mixed race have also been interpreted as universal cultural archetypes, such as the scapegoat or the Christ figure" (128).

Other scholars have addressed mixed race literature in order to move beyond arguments about race as a social construction. Cathy Boeckmann, for example, assumes race's constructedness and looks to "the topics of race, passing, bodies, and American literature using an approach based in historical vocabulary" (3). Her insightful study questions the notion of character in the late nineteenth century, arguing that "In current usage *character* is a figurative term, signifying the imagined structure of an individual's moral and ethical orientations, but in the nineteenth century it referred to a quantifiable set of inherited behaviors and tendencies that were almost always racial" (3). Her discussion turns to interracialism precisely because the "equation of outer and inner that was a cornerstone of white supremacy, and which was used to argue the absolute inferiority of African Americans, was unsettled by the mixing of physical signs of race" (30).

Boeckmann's study is also unique in that it seeks to demonstrate the significance of genre to nineteenth century questions of characterization. As Boeckmann notes, "Literature was assumed to be the best location for the representation of national and racial character, and debates over the relative merits of sentimental, romantic, and realistic fiction were embroiled in discussions of which mode offered the best form of characterization" (5). Boeckmann's study is important because it questions the role of genre in defining character and analyzes the ways in which character in nineteenth century American literature was problematized by the reality of mixed race.

Similarly, my study recognizes the recurrence of certain genres, specifically sentimental and romance fiction and autobiography, in discourses of mixed racial identity. These genres facilitate many discussions of mixed race and allow a forum for

social activism within public discourse.[1] As in the nineteenth century, when women writers often used the sentimental novel to comment upon and seek to change social conventions, many writers of popular fiction—including the genres of sentiment, romance, and autobiography—seek to make social commentary and reflect the changing social attitudes regarding race and mixed race identity. Ann duCille argues in her study of nineteenth century black women's novels that "the marriage convention has been claimed by black women writers in particular as a trope through which to explore not only the so-called more compelling questions of race, racism, and racial identity but complex questions of sexuality and female subjectivity as well" (4). Thus, duCille comments upon the longstanding use of the private, the domestic, the sentimental to explore questions regarding the public and social. Autobiography, as well, is a common genre for explorations of mixed race because, as Paul Spickard has written, "multiraciality may inevitably be autobiographical in that it is an identity that draws its life-force from fashioning and refashioning the story of the ethnic self" (92). And Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn acknowledges:

> Because most people didn't know where to place me, I made up stories about myself. In bars, cabs, and restaurants I would try on identities with strangers I knew I would never meet again. I faked accents as I pretended to be a Hawaiian dancer, an Italian tourist, and even once a Russian student. It always amazed me what I could get away with. Being mixed inspired and gave me license to test new characters, but it also cast me as a foreigner in every setting I found myself in. (ix)

Thus, O'Hearn speaks of a prevalent sense among mixed race individuals of authoring one's own identity through autobiography, allowing those of mixed race to articulate

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[1] By *popular*, of course, I mean those texts that are mass-marketed and widely available to a large population of people.

their own stories and analyze the ways in which ancestral peculiarities shape subsequent identities.

Although autobiography also served numerous black authors in the nineteenth century, my study investigates the treatment of mixed race women in twentieth century novels to trace social understandings of race, mixed-race, and gender. Unlike nineteenth-century texts dealing with mixed race characters, which often relied on tropes of conflict and turmoil, a number of twentieth-century texts have attempted to move beyond the binaries dictated by ideologies of race in order to assert the complex nature of mixed race identity, rather than insisting on the either/or model.

My study, moreover, departs from traditional investigations of literature containing mixed race characters by white and black authors in order to question the metaphorical ways in which black and mixed race authors define mixed racial identity. Because race itself is, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has suggested, a metaphor for difference, it is useful to investigate the ways in which mixed race difference has been described via the use of metaphors. What do these metaphors suggest about the nature and character of mixed race difference? In what ways do these metaphors naturalize racial difference as oppositional and hierarchical and in what ways may metaphors of mixed race disrupt this assumption of the oppositional and hierarchical nature of race? Additionally, using a feminist framework, I question the ways in which these metaphors are gendered in order to investigate the options that are made available for mixed race women and men to negotiate their identities.

My discussion focuses on the metaphorical, as well, because identity itself can be considered a metaphor for the self, for self-perception, self-understanding, and self-

awareness. If we define the self, as C.G. Jung does, as the archetype of wholeness,[2] then we might begin to see the self and self-identity as metaphorical. Moreover, as Susan Rowland has argued in her definition of archetypes, "Given that archetypal images can never exhaust the multiple possibilities of the archetype and are refracted through the personal, they can be described as fiction, metaphorical versions of an unrepresentable reality. That is, archetypal images are fictional and metaphorical, not because they are arbitrary but because they are the partial and imaginative expressions of fundamentally plural potentials for meaning" (11).

So, too, with race. As a constructed imagining of difference refracted through personal experience, race can be seen as fictional and metaphorical because it attempts to reify and make singular that which is fundamentally plural and capable of multiplicitous meaning. In fact, given that race cannot be singularly defined as simply a representation of phenotype or ancestry or experience or law, it *is* fundamentally plural in meaning. Thus, any discussion of race is already metaphorical. Acknowledging this, my study seeks to highlight the ways in which race and mixed-race are constructed through various metaphors that result in hierarchy and opposition. In so doing, we may move toward metaphors of difference that help to eradicate notions of naturalized hierarchy and opposition in favor of those that seek inclusivity, interconnections, and difference without deficit.

Feminist geographer Minelle Mahtani has embarked upon a similar project in trying to identify a more useful spatial metaphor for what she calls "multiethnic" identities. She justifies the appropriateness of this project within her disciple by noting

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[2] I acknowledge that poststructuralism has demonstrated the problematic nature of notions of the *self* and *wholeness*, and I will return to this in chapters four and five.

geographers' assertion that "all social relations are spatial, and take place within particular spatial contexts. Therefore, it follows that racism creates particular spatial patterns and codes through which spatial and racial domination is maintained. This directly impacts on questions of identity" (174). Drawing on the work of feminist theorists Gillian Rose and Elspeth Probyn, Mahtani argues for an understanding of "mobile paradoxical spaces," which articulate "notions of belonging as *movement* rather than as static positionings" (184) and which seek a space for identity that exists beyond dualisms. Similarly, my project acknowledges the impact of spatiality upon identity and notes those metaphors within American literature that highlight mixed race identity in terms of spatiality, which is common among these texts since so many of them attempt to locate a utopia of racial harmony. These metaphors, while still problematic, may offer an understanding of identity without duality and hierarchy that is not encouraged by other metaphors. Temporal metaphors, for example, often rely on notions of history that inevitably reinforce dichotomies and hierarchies—e.g., prehistoric/historic, less civilized/more civilized. Although spatial metaphors can work in dualistic ways also—e.g., inside/outside, margin/center—they may instead recognize the "mobility and simultaneity of particular subject positions" (Mahtani 180). For this reason, spatial metaphors may offer more flexible and less hierarchical notions of mixed race identity; additionally, they are readily taken up by mixed race discourses that seek a racial utopia.

Mapping the Contemporary Landscape

Because romance is often considered a genre of popular culture, it is fitting that contemporary discussions of mixed racial identity would exhibit a connection to issues traditionally housed in the domain of romance: the family, interpersonal relationships, the

role of individuals in the private and public spheres. Mixed racial identity is an important social issue in the contemporary United States due to the increase in the population of individuals whose parents are designated as members of different races. And discourses of mixed race identity span issues of family, relationships, and the individual's role in the public sphere. In fact, the issue is so prominent that numerous groups highlighted the "private" matter of mixed racial identity in the public sphere when they lobbied to have a multiracial category added to the year 2000 census. Although this proposal was ultimately defeated, respondents were allowed to select more than one box when identifying their race(s), testifying to the fact that questions of mixed racial heritage and identity are important in the lives of millions of Americans. Researchers since the 2000 census have attempted to categorize the identities of mixed race individuals in order to discern contemporary identities of mixed race. G. Reginald Daniel argues that what he has termed the new multiracial identity

> deconstructs the dichotomization of blackness and whiteness, as well as the hierarchical relationship between these two categories of experience. Its goal is to rescue racial identities from distortion and erasure by incorporating both African American and European American backgrounds. Individuals who display this identity recognize the commonalities between blacks and whites (integration), but at the same time appreciate the differences (pluralism). (6)

Although Daniels' claim supports the possibility for non-hierarchical identities of mixed race, he too readily homogenizes mixed race identity. Other researchers, however, note more diversity in individuals whose parents belong to two different socially designated races. Through a study conducted after the 2000 census, Kerry Ann Rockquemore and David L. Brunsma delineate four types of identity formation for black/white biracial individuals. First, the border identity is one that acknowledges both a

black and a white identity as well as a third identity of mixed-race. In effect, "the border identity highlights an individual's existence between two socially distinct races as defining one's biracialism. Meaning lies in their location of in-betweenness" (42). Rockquemore and Brunsma divide this border identity into two types: validated, in which others acknowledge a mixed race individual's in-between status, and unvalidated, in which "others may not understand biracial as an existing category of racial classification" (45).

A second type of identity defined by the researchers is the singular identity, which typically functions in the United States via the one-drop rule. The singular identity recognizes the binary racial classification system in the United States and asserts that individuals of mixed race must align themselves with one racial group. Given the historical reality in the United States of the one-drop rule, which states that any black ancestry makes one black, most individuals of mixed race have chosen to identify (and have been outwardly identified) as black. The researchers note, however, that a singular white identity has, at times, been possible given certain socioeconomic and phenotypical realities.

The third identity described by the researchers is the protean identity, one that maintains identity as contextual and shifting. Acknowledged as the least common type of mixed racial identity, the protean identity functions by "changing and shifting according to the group of people that [the individual] is with and the social context" (47). The researchers clarify the uniqueness of this identity by maintaining that "although most people might adjust their *behavior* to differing circumstances, [proteans adjust their] *identity* to these different circumstances" (48). Finally, Rockquemore and Brunsma

acknowledge a transcendent identity in which individuals seek to define themselves outside of racial terms. In fact, these individuals often imagine race as a barrier to the realization of their true identities, preferring instead to think of themselves as "human."[3]

It is within this social context of varied interpretations of mixed race identity that my study seeks to investigate current and historical metaphors of mixed race in twentieth-century American popular fiction. The texts I explore deal with individuals of mixed black and white ancestry, and I have delineated this precise group of women for a number of reasons. Although I acknowledge that mixed racial identity is a reality for every designated racial group, not simply black and white, and although I recognize that the current discourse on mixed race typically assumes the presence of whiteness and thereby normalizes it,[4] I have chosen black/white mixtures, in part, because "in the United States, blacks and whites continue to be the two groups with the greatest social distance, the most spatial separation, and the strongest taboos against interracial marriage" (Rockquemore and Brunsma ix). In fact, I would argue that black/white (i.e., dark/light) is one of the quintessential oppositions of western dualism and works in metaphorical relation with other dualisms (such as evil/good, ugly/beautiful, material/spiritual).

Given this black/white opposition and the metaphorical dualisms of western philosophy, I find it necessary to explore metaphors of blackness and whiteness before proceeding into an elaboration of metaphors of mixed race. I do this through a discussion of historical metaphors of blackness and whiteness, including an analysis of two nineteenth-century sentimental novels that demonstrate the complicated nature of these

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[3] Obviously, I acknowledge the problematic nature of such identities, given that race, though not a biological truism, is a social and experiential reality.

[4] Carol Roh Spaulding has astutely argued, "In American literature of the twentieth century, the term 'mixed race' almost invariably refers to individuals who are part 'white' and part 'raced'" (98).

metaphors: Emma Dunham Kelley's *Megda* and Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy, Or Shadows Uplifted*. For, as Antonio Gramsci writes "the starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as the product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory" (324).

Mapping Metaphors

Though we have entered into the twenty-first century, the importance of the nineteenth century in terms of United States' racial formation cannot be underestimated. It was during this period that cultural and phenotypic difference became codified as racial difference and these differences came to represent variations in morality, intelligence, and social progress. Indeed,

> Racialism did not emerge in full flower until the mid-nineteenth century; indeed, as many carefully note, early European representations of Native Americans had much more to do with cultural rather than so-call racial difference. . . . Although European representations of Africans had virtually always drawn attention to the darkness of African skin, which increasingly carried a host of negative connotations in European thought, still, early observers depicted African darkness as something of a marvel, even accepting the fact that the Africans themselves found their so-called blackness beautiful. In European speculations that the hotter sun, or red-colored oils were the cause for differences in skin color, is a search for commonality—even if that commonality is the ethnocentric assumption that "we all start out white." "Black" and "red" at this early juncture designated a superficial, metaphoric difference between groups of human beings. (Nelson 6)

Clearly this focus on commonality on the part of the colonialists shifted to a focus on inherent, biological difference, enabling Europeans to claim a position of superiority and manifest destiny and rendering the position of their racial Others one of inferiority and subservience.

Through "scientific" research and legal precedents such as *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1856)—which declared black people to be articles of property and, therefore, not United States citizens—and *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)—which required separate but equal accommodations for black and white travelers—*superficial, metaphoric* difference developed into *racial* difference, with all of the structural inequalities that difference entailed. And, as Abdul JanMohamed has argued, "The perception of racial difference is, in the first place, influenced by economic motives" (80). Additionally, according to David Roediger in a discussion of the development of working-class whiteness, "the first sixty-five years of the nineteenth century were the formative period of working class 'whiteness,' at least in the North, though obviously earlier habits of mind and patterns of colonialist oppression of Native Americans form an important part of the prehistory of working class whiteness" (14). Similarly, Richard Dyer alludes to research that suggests "a sense of being white, of belonging to a white race, only widely developed in the USA in the nineteenth century as part of the process of establishing a US identity" (19).

Further development of racial difference in the nineteenth century was allowed through scientific inquiry. Numerous nineteenth-century researchers deployed understandings of evolutionary biology to societies and proposed that physical differences correspond to both racial and moral differences; arguing that certain races are more advanced than others, they assumed that socio-political differences are, in fact, racial and essential and, for them, colonialism became a valid response to racial difference. Moreover, these eugenicists claimed that Caucasians "have been assigned . . . in all ages, the largest brains and the most powerful intellect; *theirs* is the mission of extending and perfecting civilization" (Nott and Gliddon 67). Because of such white

superiority, the numerous eugenicists of the nineteenth century argued that racial "amalgamation" can only be detrimental to the white race, although it could have the effect of raising the "lower" races: "the infusion of even a minute proportion of the blood of one race into another, produces a most decided modification of moral and physical character" (68). More specifically, Nott and Gliddon claim that "It is so rare, in this country, to see the offspring of a Negro man and a white woman, that I have never personally encountered an example; but such children are reported to partake more of the type of the Negro, than when the mode of crossing is reversed" (401). Clearly, such a claim was necessary in order to protect the sanctity of white womanhood and overlook the transgressions of white men who forced sexual relations with black women. Although Nott and Gliddon argued that the intellect of children usually follows the mother, they needed to reverse this claim with regard to white women and black men. Because the race of children legally followed the condition of the mother, Nott's claim guarded against the likelihood that free mulatto children would result from relations between a black man and a white woman. Here, political necessity created "scientific" knowledge.

Such nineteenth-century scientific knowledge, according to Nancy Leys Stepan, was highly dependent upon metaphor and analogy. The use of such tropes in nineteenth-century scientific inquiry influenced and maintained a power structure that dictated the place of women and people of color beneath that of white men. In this way, races and genders were constructed in specific ways and differences were maintained as natural. Because of the naturalization of racial difference, nineteenth-century authors were forced to confront the formation of "blackness" and "whiteness" as racial categories, whether in an effort to defend or to refute the emerging stereotypes. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has

argued, "Text created author; and black authors, it was hoped, would create, or re-create, the image of the race in European discourse" (11). Yet African-American authors were not concerned solely with the question of blackness; they also gave voice to questions of whiteness as well. Roediger writes, "The white problem—the question of why and how whites reach the conclusion that their whiteness is meaningful—is an intellectual and even an artistic problem for Black writers" (6). Thus, nineteenth-century texts—and, for the purposes of this study, nineteenth-century texts by African-American authors—offer an appropriate starting point for discussions of both the nature and the ontology of blackness and whiteness, discussions which interrogate not only what blackness and whiteness *are* but also what experiences are entailed for individuals in *being* black or white. Such understandings of blackness and whiteness informed notions of mixed race identities and ontology.

Mixed Metaphors

Elaine K. Ginsberg has written, "In its interrogation of the essentialism that is the foundation of identity politics, passing has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency: the opportunity to construct new identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress" (16). In other words, passing has the potential to transgress boundaries and thereby create spaces for new affiliations that problematize what is constructed to be the dominant group's inherent right to exercise oppressive power and domination. I would argue, however, that the interracial figure, whether passing or not, most powerfully represents this transgressive potential due to his or her embodiment of those metaphors of difference that are constructed as oppositional—white and black *blood*. It is this figure,

which mixes the metaphors of whiteness and blackness, which embodies the potential for deconstructing traditional notions of race. This potential is more nearly realized in twentieth century representations and articulations of mixed race that attempt to move beyond the binaries of race. Rather than insisting on the nineteenth century tropes of conflict and tragedy within mixed race, many later representations explore the potential for the reconciliation of blackness and whiteness.

Races have been constructed in particular ways in the United States since the nineteenth century, ways that have been the foundation for contemporary notions of racial identity. American society is mired still in nineteenth-century ideologies that construct whiteness as the ivory tower and blackness as the kettle black—metaphors I will investigate in the next chapter—and these metaphors are difficult to mix in the social imagination. Furthermore, with whiteness long symbolizing power and domination, a mixed race individual's claim of whiteness in addition to blackness can be construed as tantamount to a desire for power, a desire to dominate, a desire to fully inhabit the "property" of whiteness, and a desire to pass quietly into the position of a wielder of power.

Of course, whiteness is more than a sign of power and domination when viewed on a more individual level. The workings of affect, as in a disposition or strong feeling, must be considered; a mixed race individual's sincere desire to claim an affiliation with her parents—one black, one white—likely has little to do with an attempt to claim the privileges of whiteness. This desire, furthermore, may be most clearly facilitated through her ability to claim her parents' traces within her—blackness *and* whiteness. Iola Leroy's "choice" of blackness, which will be explored in the next chapter, can be seen as

necessitated by the affiliation and kinship she felt for her black mother. On the other hand, one is left to wonder how she could so quickly disregard her positive feelings for her white father. In this regard, Iola's black identification seems to have required her to subsume affect to political necessity. Had Iola chosen whiteness, in addition to or in lieu of blackness, she would have been seen as passing. Thus, regardless of the workings of affect, a mixed race individual who claims whiteness would very likely face accusations that she is attempting simply to "usurp" white privileges, to become complicit in the oppression of those with whom she should be united.

What is necessary, then, in order to avoid such accusations, may be a new definition for whiteness, one that eschews its cultural connotations of power and domination. Annalee Newitz suggests that white identity must undergo a "progressive transformation," one that allows its dissociation from ideologies of white power (151) and Robyn Wiegman writes of a "counterwhiteness whose primary characteristic is its disaffiliation from white supremacist practices" (119). Alternatively, what I suggest is not a new definition or a new term for whiteness but a new metaphor for mixed race identity. Although mixed race identity has also been traditionally equated with conflict, the conflict is not necessarily lived but may be more accurately viewed as a conflict of language, a conflict of metaphors. What is now needed is a metaphor that explicitly rejects the longstanding association of whiteness with domination and blackness with degradation, a metaphor which explodes the negative connotations of both the ivory tower and the kettle black, a metaphor which is clearly, and confidently, *mixed.*

Playing With the Map

Of course, in this postmodern age when multiplicity and heterogeneity within the self are touted, the claim that one can become a homogeneous, centered being is problematic. A poststructuralist critique would claim that wholeness is impossible, that the center is lacking, that there cannot be, in fact, an authentic self. Yet it is such thinking that sometimes leads to the idea that coalition is equally impossible, that identity is so unique and individualized that it precludes solidarity and community. A poststructuralist critique of wholeness and coherence would suggest that such qualities are impossible to attain and, perhaps, even undesirable. After all, as George Levine has noted, "The concept of the 'self,' fully naturalized into a coherent, stable, and normative essence, is precisely what is invoked to dismiss deviations from the norm as symptoms of illness or criminality" (8). For poststructuralists, the notion of structure implies organization but also implies play, implies a movement that is both produced and limited by a point of presence, a fixed origin, a center. The notion of a center, an idea that relies on fixity, unity, and full presence, is problematic for poststructuralists, who would argue that such characteristics are mythical. There is no fixity. There is no unity. There is no full presence.

Yet "some concept of the 'self' needs to be recognized and reconstructed—one that does not succumb to the political, psychological, and epistemological failures that have plagued the self from the time of its invention in the West" (Levine 3). How, then,

can one speak of wholeness and an authentic self,[5] which imply that coherence, unity, and being are possible? Derrida writes that

> Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around. (292)

Thus, according to Derrida, play does not negate the possibility of presence and absence; rather it would seem that play is a precondition of being in an ontological sense. Because it would be difficult to rid ourselves of the notion of center, which exists as an organizing principle, rather than a part of structure, more useful is a consideration of the way the center moves, of the play inherent in any system or being. Mixed race identity, then, can work within this possibility because it acknowledges that fixity is missing; instead, there is an absence, a lack of structure, which allows play (infinite substitutions, supplementary interpretations and meanings). Any notion of mixed race identity that does not allow play, that seeks fixity (through limiting notions of the one-drop rule and hypodescent, for example), removes the condition for being.

Play may usefully be imagined as a foregrounding and receding of identity components in varying contexts; play is multiplicity and difference enacted based on social situations. Rather than discarding or ignoring those parts of identity not compatible with certain contexts, the individual at play highlights various components over others, while still allowing all components to speak to and implicate that individual's self-definition and public presentation. Perhaps it will be necessary, then, to seek play before

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[5] Debra Walker King acknowledges that "At its best, 'authenticity' . . . is an understanding of self supported by introspective awareness, honest self-evaluation, personal integrity, and self-avowed worth" (x).

wholeness, to acknowledge the ways in which mixed race identity "plays" with the structure of racial categorization, rather than seeking a fixed and unchanging sense of self. Conversely, perhaps play is the essence of wholeness, rather than authenticity or stability. In fact, wholeness might be more usefully imagined not as coherence and stability but as variety and difference, as the allowance of infinite substitutions, as an acceptance of the various parts that comprise the whole, much like the construction of various states, provinces, and countries seeks to order and comprise the globe. Wholeness in this sense becomes akin to what Judy Elsley terms "cohesive fragmentation" (164). Although Elsley finds multiplicity and wholeness antithetical, she states, "Fragmentation and diversity become not a limitation but a trademark, a strength" (169). By allowing new patterns to emerge, new possibilities for being, responding, and relating to surface, fragmentation and diversity become positive conditions that deconstruct the hegemony of *rigid* coherence and sameness. Yet it is also true that, through a redefinition of wholeness that allows play, one can acknowledge a sense of self that revels in multiplicity and still remains coherent in the sense of an individual "I": "Once perceived or imagined, the self implies doubleness, multiplicity. For what knows the awareness of the self if not the self?: division as premise and price of consciousness" (Howe 249). This somewhat romantic notion of self-consciousness as double still acknowledges the fact that the self is multiplicitous while at the same time often conscious of itself as singular.

Thus, my notion of "play" within identity works in terms of Derrida's notion of play within structures, which occurs when the elements within that structure are deconstructed or "shaken up" by other structural elements that point to its flawed nature. We may link this notion to identities by realizing that all individuals function within a

sense of self—a persona presented to the world with the semblance of stability. Like any other "structure," identities contain their own conflicts and contradictions, allowing shift, room to move—in other words, "play." In terms of identity, then, play is the possibility of negotiation and individualization—it is the paradox that allows one of mixed race to be not black, not white, and yet both.

Mapping the Path Ahead

In search of metaphors that allow or disallow play, my study traverses historical and contemporary metaphors of mixed race identity in novels dealing with mixed race women. These novels all respond to a set of problems linked to historical crystallizations of blackness and whiteness that would seem to preclude the possibility of racial harmony *within* mixed race identities. Because of the historical treatment of mixed race, which included opposition and hierarchy between the races within one's identity, most nineteenth century portrayals of mixed race limited their characters' options to passing or accepting the one-drop rule. Each option, however, relied on negations of ancestry and possibly self-identity as well as negations of the vision of a potentially more-inclusive definition of community and family. Such visions, reflecting personal and national utopias, were necessarily discarded until social discourse became amenable to these discussions. Even in the midst of widening discourse, however, these texts contain a latent struggle over questions of history, family, and racial identity. They struggle to articulate utopian visions while they are confined within the historical moments and literary formulas in which they were written. They struggle to negotiate postmodern questions of identity, self, wholeness, and harmony—both individual and communal—while bound by literary and social conventions that resist the utopian visions

these texts long to articulate. Thus, these seemingly diverse texts—which do not fit into one literary period or genre—are united by their shared questioning of identity and wholeness. Additionally, the texts also respond to questions about the historical and potential roles of black and white men as fathers. In many of the novels, black fathers are both elevated and made abject, resulting in a tension that seems to acknowledge the historical denial of black fatherhood and the longing for its affirmation and enactment.

The texts within my study, which are all first novels containing mixed race women, share similar concerns and negotiate similar challenges. Additionally, they each attempt to envision utopian social, political, familial and individual spaces where the "play" of identity—which I define as the possibility of negotiation and individualization of identities—may be manifested, utopian visions of harmony may be realized, and new metaphors may be articulated.

Chapter 2 investigates the crystallization of racial ideologies and racial metaphors through an interrogation of cultural constructions of blackness and whiteness by reading two nineteenth-century sentimental novels by African-American women: Emma Dunham Kelley's *Megda* and Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy, Or Shadows Uplifed.* Nineteenth century racial metaphors, I argue, crystallized oppositional and hierarchical notions of race, even when these notions exhibited confusion over the negative versus positive polarity of blackness and whiteness. Imaginings of mixed race during the nineteenth century, then, worked from within these dichotomized constructions of race and also were used to both uphold and condemn constructions of racial difference.

In chapter 3, I shift to twentieth century representations of mixed race, which were shaped by earlier crystallizations of race as exhibited in nineteenth century

metaphors. This chapter focuses on Jean Toomer, likely the most renowned mixed race writer of the early twentieth century, and his work in *Cane* and the poem "The Blue Meridian," which is especially interesting due to its use of a spatial metaphor that attempts to bridge the oppositional construction of binaries. Interestingly, *Cane* exhibits distinct anxieties regarding mixed race while "The Blue Meridian" offers a metaphor that recognizes the mixed race body as a site where differences unite, rather than a space where they collide in conflict and, inevitably, destruction. Within the poem, the mixed race body becomes a space of productive existence, a more utopian view than that offered by *Cane*.

Chapter 4 looks at the recently republished *Oreo* by Fran Ross. Originally published in 1974, Ross's novel is a rewriting of the mythical story of Theseus, and it casts the mixed race heroine as the metaphorical traveler and border crosser, the individual on the quest for self. Additionally, the title character manipulates the borders of gender in interesting ways. In fact, Oreo moves beyond limited notions of the feminine in her ability to travel, cross borders, and ignore boundaries. She, unlike traditional notions of the feminine, is completely active and never passive; she is mobile rather than static, multiple rather than singular. Rather than existing on the borderlands, in some indeterminate limbo, Oreo constantly embodies movement and change and, like a mythological hero, actively participates in a quest for her origins and, by extension, a quest for herself. Metaphors of traveler, translator, mediator, and border crosser offer more positive visions of mixed race that, nevertheless, suggest the impossibility of reaching the utopia sought.

In chapter 5, I investigate metaphors of mixed racial identity in Danzy Senna's novel *Caucasia*. Senna's novel allows a continuation of the discussion begun with *Oreo* of travel metaphors of mixed race identity. However, *Caucasia*, unlike *Oreo*, does not celebrate mixed race identity as movement; rather in its similar quest for origins, it searches for a site of belonging (a prominent trope in literature of mixed race) and for the recapture of an assumed paradise lost. This search for an imagined original utopia is, additionally, a search for wholeness. Because this wholeness remains unrealized, *Caucasia* in some ways seems to reinscribe the tragedy of mixed race; yet it questions this type by offering a tentative space of belonging among others who also embody traditional dichotomies.

Finally, in chapter 6, I turn to the recently published debut novel of Jenoyne Adams, *Resurrecting Mingus*, and address the question of the romance genre as a frame for discourses of mixed race identity. As illustrated by my analysis in chapter two of *Megda* and *Iola Leroy*, the sentimental and romantic genres have long facilitated discussions of miscegenation, and *Resurrecting Mingus* continues this generic tradition. Additionally, I demonstrate the centrality of a particular spatial metaphor that serves as a locus for questions of mixed race identity in the text. This metaphor, furthermore, continues a tradition in which women's identities are defined in terms of the domestic sphere and familial relationships.

Chapter 7 concludes my discussion by exploring the significance of recent spatial metaphors of mixed race identity in twentieth-century American literature. Using the Jungian notion of the crystallization of archetypes as a metaphor, the conclusion discusses the ways in which notions of social race and social gender are crystallized into

oppositional difference. These crystallizations are challenged by what I call meridian metaphors of mixed race identity that seek non-oppositional, non-hierarchical visions of difference; such meridian metaphors may offer a map of mixed race identity and difference that moves beyond traditional dimensions while still acknowledging the map's construction and the limits of cartography.

CHAPTER 2
THE IVORY TOWER AND THE KETTLE BLACK: NINETEENTH CENTURY METAPHORS OF RACE

Race Crystallized

Since my maternal grandmother and grandfather had fourteen children and since most of them had numerous children of their own, my family is quite large. To the public eye, mine is a white family. Sprinkled among the white faces in family snapshots, though, are a number of brown ones of various shades—faces like mine on the bodies of people like me: "mixed raced." Of course, most of us may not think of ourselves as mixed raced; in fact, many of us might not see ourselves in terms of race at all. For me, growing up welcomed and secure in this extended family, I didn't often consider my racial background; in fact, I don't remember knowing much about "race" at all. Not knowing my black father or his family meant that I had only one family—this white one—and here was where I felt a sure sense of belonging. Naturally, I noticed color, but I'd been raised to believe that my color was simply another—not the sole—marker of my uniqueness. To the extent that I considered it, my racial mixture was merely the cause of my brownness, and it held no other relevant effects. Simply put, I was just one of the red poppies amidst the pink—just a differently colored flower.

Then, on the cusp of my teenage years, I heard through the grapevine of cousins that one aunt "felt sorry for the mixed kids" in the family. My throat tightened, my equilibrium slightly tilted, my face infused with a reddish tinge. *Sorry? Why? If I were so special, then why would anyone feel sorry for someone like me?* As best as I can isolate

it, this was the moment when I sensed the negative connotations of "special." This was the moment when I recognized race, when an understanding of race and racial difference crystallized in my imagination.

With such recognition came the weight of stereotypical assumptions regarding whiteness and blackness, assumptions based on a history of dualisms that has constructed race, in part, through oppositional and hierarchical metaphors. Although difference, specifically racial difference, for centuries had been part of the cultural imagination of western civilization, particular notions regarding race became crystallized in the nineteenth century—that is, cultural and phenotypic difference became codified as racial difference through legislation and through significant scientific attention to the presumed biology of race; these racial differences came to represent variations in morality, intelligence, and social progress through theories of social Darwinism and eugenics. In turn, these crystallizations of racial difference, informed as they were through science and the law, impacted society in both the public and domestic spheres, allowing assumptions about race to become self-fulfilling prophesies through the choices afforded those of various races.

Nineteenth century notions of whiteness and blackness—which were also gendered in their constructions—may be succinctly articulated through the metaphors of the ivory tower and the kettle black, and the understanding of race employed through these metaphors further dictated constructions of mixed race. Indeed, these crystallizations of black and white races as oppositional and hierarchical influenced nineteenth century—and later—discourses of mixed race, resulting in prophesies of the doomed fate of any individual of mixed race who refused to adhere to the dictates of

hypodescent, and tales of tragic mulattos abound in nineteenth century sentimental novels. Conversely, racial mixture was also used in the nineteenth century—again, often within the frame of the sentimental genre—to highlight the plight of blacks and the horrors of racism. Thus, constructions of mixed race were formed by notions of black/white racial difference as they concurrently informed understandings of blackness and whiteness; discourses of racial mixture were used by both supporters and denouncers of racial hierarchies to respectively confirm and condemn the assumed traits of racial difference. Therefore, an exploration of nineteenth century constructions of whiteness and blackness illuminates an understanding of the formation of mixed race difference.

Whiteness, the ivory tower, has historically been assumed in the cultural imagination to be monolithic, impenetrable, phallocentric, and pure. Racial purity was in the nineteenth century, and *is* for racial purists in the twenty-first, a crucial element of whiteness. The 1896 case of *Plessy v. Ferguson* demonstrated clearly the anxiety over "commingling," whether spatially or sexually, that rested at the heart of notions of white purity. The case demonstrated that being white meant being free of miscegenation, both literally and metaphorically:

> The object of the [fourteenth] amendment was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but, in the nature of things, it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political, equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either. (1140)

This case, in addition to establishing the purity of whiteness, defined whiteness as a property: "the reputation of belonging to the dominant race, in this instance the white race, is 'property,' in the same sense that a right of action or of inheritance is property"

(1142).[1] Thus, in declaring that whiteness was a property, the Supreme Court constructed whiteness as a status of privilege and wealth, a valuable asset that afforded one power and even the ability to dominate. It was this property, secured through the purity of whiteness, which was threatened by racial commingling.

As Richard Dyer attests, whiteness, in addition to becoming a "property," became conflated with "Americanness." Although Werner Sollors argues that "the symbolic construction of American kinship has helped to weld Americans of diverse origins into one people, even if the code at times requires the exaggeration of differences" (*Beyond* 15), such American kinship is reserved most exclusively for those persons constructed as white. Thus, during the nineteenth-century, inclusion within the privileged category of whiteness was vigorously sought by working-class ethnic immigrants such as those of Irish, Italian, and Polish descent. Although such groups lacked the privilege in economic terms that would have distanced them from more obviously "colored" groups such as Asians, Africans, and Native Americans, inclusion within the category of "whiteness" allowed them alternate "wages," to use David Roediger's term. These wages established their privilege and worth or value in racial, rather than economic, terms.

In addition to the parallel with "American," whiteness also has been associated with independence, industry, and success. "It is not spirituality or soul that is held to distinguish whites, but what we might call 'spirit': get up and go, aspiration, awareness of the highest reaches of intellectual comprehension and aesthetic refinement" (Dyer 23).

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[1] Justice Harlan, dissenting from the majority opinion, argued, "The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power" (1143). Although he acknowledged the dominance of the white race, he simultaneously argued that the white race's dominance was a construction, a product of its power and privilege, and not an inherent property.

Whiteness is an indispensable characteristic of the frontiersman, through whose efforts, we are led to believe, the United States was founded. White identity, moreover,

> is founded on compelling paradoxes: a vividly corporeal cosmology that most values transcendence of the body; a notion of being at once a sort of race and the human race, an individual and a universal subject; a commitment to heterosexuality that, for whiteness to be affirmed, entails men fighting against sexual desires and women having none; a stress on the display of spirit while maintaining a position of invisibility; in short, a need always to be everything and nothing, literally overwhelmingly present and yet apparently absent, both alive and dead. (Dyer 39)

Whiteness, even in the twenty-first century, maintains associations with the ivory tower: deemed worthy of admiration, praise, and attention, yet simultaneously too large to see, too obviously and eternally present to require notice. Blackness, on the other hand, in many ways still is equated with the kettle black—inferior, dirty, more feminine than masculine, and a catch-all for all that is not white. Because of slavery's degradations, black men were excluded from the socially constructed masculine ideal. After slavery and because of widespread disenfranchisement, black men still were denied access to the patriarchal power offered through success in the public, capitalist realm. In apparent contrast with this emasculation of black men is the connection made between blackness and sexuality, a connection that has served to separate further blackness from whiteness. The cerebral and spiritual associations of whiteness often have called for a concomitant denial of sexual urges in both men and women; blackness, however, is not only expected to express sexuality, it is also conflated with sexuality. Sander Gilman has insightfully outlined the association of blackness with overt sexuality in the nineteenth-century imagination, and, of course, such representation is still visible today. Gilman further argues that black sexuality became equated with black *women*, specifically, in the nineteenth century; the construction of the cult of true womanhood, furthermore, allowed

white women to embody those characteristics of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity and also refused to allow black women to embody such characteristics without questioning the structural inequalities that prevented many black women from demonstrating these traits. As Hazel Carby has noted,

> The sexual ideology of the period thus confirmed the differing material circumstances of these two groups of women and resolved the contradiction between the two reproductive positions [producer of heirs or producer of property, in the sense of chattel] by balancing opposing definitions of womanhood and motherhood, each dependent on the other for its existence. (25)

Clearly, whiteness and blackness typically occupy the positive and negative poles of the racial dichotomy, respectively, although each can also be associated with the opposite characteristics. Because of its pureness and impenetrability, whiteness has been imagined at times as cold, lifeless, ornamental, unsustaining, and even representative of death. Blackness, conversely, has been thought to offer life, vitality, vigor, virility, warmth, and sustenance. Because of the dichotomous thought of Western societies, whiteness and blackness have been necessary in constructing each other, and, clearly, they represent a quintessential opposition according to American society, with blacks still being a vilified group in a culture that glorifies whiteness and finds meaning through dichotomies. In illustrating that the construction of whiteness in America has been dependent upon an opposing construction of blackness, Toni Morrison has written, "the image of a reined-in, bound, suppressed, and repressed darkness became objectified in American literature as an Africanist presence" (39). This Africanist presence, in turn, was invoked by white writers and became "crucial to their sense of Americanness" (6). White writers, then, could use blackness as a metaphor against which to construct Americans as white. Primitivized minorities within cultural constructions have represented a group

against which whites could define themselves. The oppositional nature of such constructions between races is vital to understandings of mixed race as a site of conflict and turmoil, for if races in larger society are imagined to be diametrically opposed, then they likewise must be imagined within the individual. Given the comparative nature of oppositional assumptions regarding racial characteristics, races necessarily have been simultaneously constructed along a hierarchy of value, prowess, and potential. Popularized around the turn of the century through the application of evolutionary theory to human society, eugenicist theories asserted that weak, primitivized races would die away while the fittest would survive. Of course, these eugenicist theories were developed on a pseudo-scientific basis whose hypotheses always defined white as the fittest.

Constructions of whiteness have allowed it to dominate while concurrently keeping its connection to power invisible, unmarked, and unnamed. Leaving this connection unexamined allows many whites to imagine that white supremacy refers only to violent segregation, preventing many from self-reflexively analyzing their access to power and privilege. Because the power and domination that are available to whiteness historically have remained invisible, they have, therefore, been difficult to confront and combat. Nevertheless, African-Americans and other racial minorities have long made efforts to challenge the dominating power of whiteness and to redefine blackness (and "color") in positive terms. Likewise, numerous mixed raced individuals have made similar efforts, and though some have felt the seduction of white identification for the power and privilege it can provide, many have articulated a black identification. Attractive for alternative reasons, black identification has been a positive choice for many

individuals who may have struggled with the dichotomously constructed blackness and whiteness they contain.

Climbing the Ivory Tower

Emma Dunham Kelley's 1891 novel *Megda* offers a discussion of whiteness and blackness that reflects the complexity of nineteenth century crystallizations of race. Like other sentimental novels of the time, Kelley's novel articulates political and religious messages through tales of romance, family, and the feminized domestic sphere, allowing this feminized realm to speak on public issues constructed as masculine and to bring domestic concerns into the public world. *Megda* tells the story of a group of schoolgirls who embark upon womanhood with inconsistent loyalties to their duties as Christians and their prospects as women. Meg, the title character, is a feisty heroine beloved by all, yet one whose pride and independence must be tamed by the male Christian minister—Reverend Stanley—before she makes a desirable wife—one who, though she may have a mind of her own, realizes that this mind ought to be in agreement with her God's (and her husband's) will.

Although Claudia Tate has written that *Megda* is among a number of "'white' or 'raceless' works" (23) and although white is typically assumed to be unraced, whiteness in *Megda* is raced strikingly. Whiteness is valorized throughout the text as its characters climb the ivory tower, and some critics have suggested that such valorization is in acquiescence to a white audience.[2] Contrary to much critical thought, however, *Megda* does not present palatable white characters to present a simple story of Christian morals

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[2] Additionally, Tate has claimed,"By making racial difference unimportant, this novel already presumes as gratified the political objectives of racial equality depicted in traditional black works" (24). For this reason, Tate argues that "the nonracialized feminist paradigm about gender inequity may seem more appropriate" for a critical reading of *Megda* and asks: "Does this mean that we should read *Megda* as we read *Little Women*, since we cannot read *Megda* like *Iola Leroy*?" (23).

and domestic bliss; instead, its use of sentiment and religion are vehicles for the novel's discussion of race and gender. Since race and gender are used collaboratively to mark individuals in specific ways, we cannot claim that *Megda* is an unraced work about gender. In fact, the text resists simplified readings of race, given the fact that it appears to be about white people but is written within a cultural context of blackness. It is true that Kelly does not make race *as explicit* an object of study as most other nineteenth-century African-American writers did. This fact of the text's "hidden" racial commentary makes its investigation even more worthwhile, for this latent discourse reveals important clues regarding cultural constructions of blackness and whiteness within the nineteenth century. Kelley's text exhibits tensions within its formulations of whiteness, blackness, and gender that comment upon social assumptions about race, color, class, and gender roles.

This tension surrounding race and gender within the novel is notable through the shifting use of color throughout. Whiteness symbolizes purity, goodness, transcendence, and other positive characteristics, yet it is also used to highlight fear, pride, coldness, sickness, weakness, and even death. Ethel, unquestionably the most pure character in the novel and, therefore, the woman most desired by the male protagonist, is first depicted as having a "fair, sweet face" (12) and her whiteness is increasingly emphasized throughout the text. May is described as "white as a snowdrop" with hair that "shone like gold" (108). Dell, "the beauty of the town," has skin that is "dazzling white, without one tinge of pink in it" (36). Thus, throughout the novel, whiteness becomes indicative of purity, goodness, and beauty. Of course, whiteness within *Megda* also functions as a signifier of salvation. In her attempt to convert Meg to Christianity, Ethel insists that "For all these

things [she must eschew] He will give you a robe of whiteness and a crown of beauty that fadeth not away" (145).

It is even more significant, then, that Meg wears a black robe during her baptism, which is performed not inside the church but in the river, and that the "deep black made her face look like marble" (322) Although Meg may be depicted here as having attained the ultimate whiteness of purity, it is also possible that her whiteness is meant to represent coldness and even the death of sentiment and sincerity. Since she may be insincere in her acceptance of Christianity, she lacks the purity that white connotes. This insincerity, in keeping with the character's pride and independence, may additionally make her less of a woman than Ethel, whose religious sentiment is true, whose independence is tempered through obedience and who, therefore, is first to be engaged to the minister. The simile comparing Meg to marble, additionally, recalls the scene when Meg plays Lady Macbeth, a scene that equates whiteness with pride, sinfulness, and coldness. Meg's baptism, then, is tainted by these connotations, suggesting that her baptism may not be heart-felt acquiescence to the will of God and that it, like her role as Lady Mcbeth, is merely a performance.

For the theater performance of Lady Macbeth, "Meg wore her favorite pure white cashmere. A large bunch of exquisite white roses was in her belt. She looked pale, but oh, so girlishly sweet and pure." (152) Additionally, when Meg is described as being "the color of marble," Laurie comments "the whiter, the better" (157). And though Meg would never be beautiful, "in that costume she looked like a queen" (158). Despite the overwhelming praise she receives for her performance and for her costume, which emphasizes whiteness, Meg cannot feel completely proud because Reverend Stanley, the

man she admires, does not approve of the theater. Thus, although the text depicts Meg as willful and independent, it simultaneously demonstrates in her the dissatisfaction that results from non-conformity to male desire. Additionally, the novel makes clear that pride is a sin, one which Meg is continually guilty of displaying. The text suggests, then, that pride is a debilitating factor in women's most true calling—winning a husband—and that pride in whiteness itself may be associated with sin, making whiter not always better.

In fact, the whiteness Ethel assumes during her illness confirms that whiteness symbolizes, in addition to purity and beauty, weakness and death. Furthermore, when Meg's conversion becomes inevitable, descriptions of Dell, one of the girls Meg admired for her convictions and independent spirit, equate Dell's whiteness with coldness and link this fact symbolically to her lack of conversion: "Dell's lovely face . . . was white, cold and perfectly composed. She had never felt the least desire to become a Christian" (216). Dell's beauty in this description becomes the shell surrounding a void; here, she becomes like a statue and her inner convictions, which Meg had praised as "true blue," become synonymous with nothingness since those convictions do not lead her to Christ and, thereby to Christ's representative in marriage: a husband.

Dell, additionally, understands that it is her whiteness that makes her so beautiful, yet her whiteness is markedly different from Ethel's:

> "There is a great difference between the whiteness of my skin and that of Ethel's," replied Dell, who fully realized how beautiful she was, but didn't consider it necessary to be foolish because she was beautiful; therefore, she accepted the fact as a fact, and nothing more. "Mine is a healthy white, and hers a sickly white." (221)

Although both Dell and Ethel are depicted as beautiful, Dell's beauty is merely external, with none of the inner beauty occasioned by the presence of Christ in her soul. Ethel, on

the other hand, is beautiful both inside and out because she is the epitome of goodness and purity; she is an angel too good for earth, the woman who initially wins Reverend Stanley.[3] Yet Dell's beauty is also equated here with a certain vibrancy provided by health and, possibly, by her ability to enjoy life's pleasures—even, perhaps, by her independence. Ethel, in contrast, grows weaker as she grows whiter, and whiteness comes to signify a lack of health, vitality, and life. She, who would devote her life to Christ and to her husband, dies before her marriage. Ethel, a victim of consumption, is consumed by whiteness, "her face as white as the pillow on which it rested," the pillow of her deathbed (337). Ethel dies in her room, which is decorated entirely in white, and is buried in her wedding dress, making the association of whiteness and death quite clear as well displaying the text's tension regarding women's roles and the prospect for women's "life" within the confines of patriarchy.

Thus, *Megda* is conflicted in its view of women, and its connotations of whiteness are likewise intricate and paradoxical. Darkness, too, is equally complex in its constructions in the novel. The pure-hearted but economically disadvantaged Ruth is exceptionally dark. In fact, she is the only woman within the text who is explicitly described as "dark-faced." Maude, though not brown-skinned, is dark-featured; her hair and her eyes are described in terms of their raven blackness. And Maude, the texts insists through its plot and character development, is not a character worthy of our admiration or respect. Maude, in fact, is explicitly compared to both Ethel and Meg in terms of both her

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[3] At Ethel's baptism, in fact, Meg describes Ethel in angelic terms:

> All the girls had worn white, but somehow or other it seemed as if there was something about Ethel that the others did not have. The slender, fragile form seemed almost spiritualized. Her skin was as white as the driven snow; her eyes large, blue and shining. But lovelier than anything Meg had ever seen was the expression of the delicate face. I cannot paint it; only it was just such an expression as Meg had always imagined the angels of Heaven must wear. (224)

physical characteristics and her spiritual condition: "She formed a strong contrast to Ethel and Meg, with her dark, richly-colored face; large, black eyes and raven hair. It made Ethel's delicate loveliness look almost spiritual, and Meg's white face look whiter still, and her light-brown hair almost golden" (171). Maude's marriage is loveless and results in her death, although her dark-eyed daughter is redeemed by being adopted by Reverend Stanley and Meg, who marry after Ethel's death and Meg's acquiescence to God. At Maude's death, all color is gone from her face, making it "white enough now" (388). Of course, the associations of whiteness here are twofold and reflective of the often contradictory associations of racial dualities: Maude is white enough because she has been purified by repentance and sincere acceptance of Christ, yet she is also white enough because she is nearly dead.

Meg, interestingly, is depicted as somewhat dark—reflecting her distance from Ethel's religious and feminine purity—until she is compared with the darker Maude; Meg is light-skinned, but her hair and eyes are brown, rather than the blonde and blue of Ethel, who is, unquestionably, the purest and most "true" woman in her small circle of friends. Upon the readers' first introduction to her, Meg is described as having a "pair of lovely dark eyes" and "two small, white hands," which, the text continually suggests, are her best feature (9). In fact, Meg's brother comments on her hand: "Pretty is no name for it . . . It is a regular little beauty" (33). This odd comment is notable both for its peculiar content and for the fact that it is made by Meg's brother while she sits upon his lap, giving the scene a suggestion of sexual impropriety through incest—historically a common theme in discussions of mixed race—that may imply Meg's deviance as a woman because she is independent but that also associates her most redeeming quality

with the part of her "taken" by man in marriage. Meg's liminal state between independence and desirability as a wife accompanies her liminal position in terms of race as well. Meg often wears gray, mingling white and black, and this becomes a symbol of her in-betweenness. This in-betweenness may be considered a characteristic of Meg's racial heritage—like Iola Leroy, she may be racially mixed—as well as of her character. In her introduction, Molly Hite describes Meg as "ethically mixed" (xxix), suggesting that Meg's conversion to Christianity is not entirely sincere, that her morals are not entirely pure, and that she is not entirely a woman. Meg is, after all, conflicted in her desire to accept Christianity. She remarks that, if Maude Leonard "is a specimen of a Christian, all I can say is, deliver me from the misfortune of being one" (11). Meg, additionally, continues to assert that she will have no part of a church that accepts hypocrites such as Maude. Yet Meg's turmoil over entering the church does not result merely from the hypocrisy she sees within it; she is also conflicted because she cannot resolve her hubris: "Pride was Meg's besetting sin; it often kept her from converting noble thoughts into noble actions" (102), and this hubris is explicitly given as the reason for her initial rejection by Reverend Stanley.

Thus, Meg's embodiment of "ethical [and gender] mixture" is illustrated through the use of color within the text. Her "delicate, white, slender, dimpled hand" (13), the hand that would perform noble actions, is inhibited by her pride, so often revealed in her "dark eyes," which in turn inhibits her marriage prospects. Moreover, Meg is often depicted with a hint of color tainting her fair, white face: "There was a slight tinge of pink in her usually pale cheek" when she feels scorn that Ethel has chosen to criticize her favorite activities of dancing and theater (37). Thus, Meg's often darkening cheeks offer

a contrast to Ethel's and Dell's. Ethel remains free of the stain of color through her moral purity and goodness, her epitome of womanhood. Dell, on the other hand, remains uncolored because she is the epitome of beauty and because she is, as Meg has described her, "true blue," unwilling to compromise what she believes in and, thus, unwilling to join the church before she feels a sincere conversion. Thus, although Dell is independent, she is allowed praise within the text because she is redeemed by other essential characteristics of womanhood: physical beauty and sincerity.

Rather than simply pandering to the tastes of a white audience, Kelley's text, then, illustrates complex notions regarding gender as it struggles with questions of agency within womanhood. Additionally it exhibits tensions between blackness and whiteness that existed within the nineteenth century cultural imagination and which continue to impact subsequent notions of race. Megda's in-betweenness and the text's racial presumption, if not racial ambiguity, assume no choice is available or necessary in terms of her racial identification, yet the text exhibits a distinct tension surrounding color and its meanings. It demonstrates that whiteness and blackness represent a number of complex and often contradictory ideas, problematizing strict associations of blackness with the negative and whiteness with the positive. Although characters within *Megda* appear to climb the ivory tower, the text's metaphors of whiteness and blackness insist that such a location is not without its limitations.

Climbing into the Kettle Black

Although metaphors of whiteness include negative connotations that problematize its construction, blackness, of course, has occupied the most limited and vilified position on the black/white pole. Artist and writer Adrian Piper has written, "What joins me to

other blacks...and other blacks to one another, is not a set of shared physical characteristics, for there is none that all blacks share. Rather, it is the shared experience of being visually or cognitively *identified* as black by a white racist society, and the punitive and damaging effects of that identification" (267). Yet Piper acknowledges that she is not easily *identified* as black; her light (even "white") complexion functions to problematize her claims to a black identity in the eyes of many she meets. In fact, Piper admits that she faces not only accusations of a desire to pass for white but also accusations that she literally passes for black. Piper's contemporary experience parallels many nineteenth century fictive representations of racial mixture, such as Frances E.W. Harper's *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, published in 1892, which relates the common tale of a mixed raced woman raised as white until her white father dies and she is forced into slavery. Such tales were used by supporters of racial equity to illustrate the tragedy of racial oppression, which seemed all the more tragic since, as these lily white protagonists show, racism could easily affect anyone with one drop of black blood. Of course, such tales also functioned to preserve ideologies of white supremacy since their interracial heroines often faced the tragic mulatto's fate if they attempted to pass and claim the privileges reserved for white women. Nevertheless, accusations that individuals such as Piper and characters such as Harper's protagonist could pass for white but choose to pass for black offer telling instances for the study of constructions of blackness and whiteness as well as what is gained and lost when one is expected to choose one race above the other.

Discussions of race within *Iola Leroy* and other texts that rely on metaphors of blood maintain associations between race and biology; in these instances, blackness is

seen as a powerful stain and an inescapable force that no generational distance will diminish. Black "blood" is often depicted in terms of its strength and vigor, of its powerful presence and its ability to blot out any whiteness, even when its presence is proportionally smaller. The black character Uncle Ben is described "as if the blood of some strong race were stirring with sudden vigor through his veins" (30), and Iola herself claims—once she is made aware of it—that the "best blood in my veins is African blood, and I am not ashamed of it" (208). Indeed, Iola's "African blood" may be understood as her best blood, given the fact that her ability to recognize its influence despite its miniscule presence suggests its powerful presence and vitality.

Bases for racial identities do not rely solely on essentialist metaphors of blood, however; they also invoke questions of affiliation, kinship, and desire.[4] Iola's assertion that she wishes to be with her own people tells of her affiliation with black Americans and such affiliation can be predicated upon political alliance or kinship, upon the desire to align oneself with those one loves. As Iola states, all the rest of her family have aligned themselves with the "colored race" (235); because of this fact, Iola can see no other possibility for her own identification if she wishes to remain emotionally connected to those she loves. Further evidence of racial identification based upon kinship and desire is offered by both Iola's brother, Harry, and by her future (black) husband, Dr. Latimer. Harry acknowledges that it was "love for [his] mother" that allowed him to overcome "all repugnance" he felt at the idea of aligning himself with blackness (202). And Dr.

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[4] "Desire" here is broadly construed as affection, love, affinity, interest in affiliation, etc. Additionally, I am considering affiliation in these instances to mean something other than political alliance. In these instances, characters identify as black because loved ones do, but these loved ones identify as black because their physical characteristics dictate that they are black. Since the repeal of anti-miscegenation laws in 1967 and the boom in mixed raced families, the pull of kinship represents a strong force in the racial identification of many mixed raced individuals who assert that they will not deny any portion of their heritage.

Latimer, again invoking mother-love, attests, "My mother . . . belongs to that race. Where else should I be? (263). Thus, it is the desire to remain affiliated with loved ones that causes both men to assume no identification outside of blackness. Interestingly, it is the desire to remain close to mothers, from whom each character (Iola, Harry, and Dr. Latimer) had been separated by the forces of slavery, which necessitates this identification. Such identification reflects the nineteenth-century dictate that the children's racial status followed that of the mother and, thus, reflects the strong matrilineal heritage of black communities. Slavery forced the physical separation of mothers and children, and the text's alignment of these characters with their mothers demonstrates its acknowledgement of this history. Although law necessitated black identification for individuals such as Iola, Harry, and Robert based on the one-drop rule and the mother's racial classification, many consciously choose to align their identities with their matrilineal heritage. As Robert claims at the beginning of the novel, "A boy ain't nothin' without his mother" (17); the novel, then, asserts that no person is anything without affiliation (and even reunion) with his or her ancestors. To deny kinship and refuse to follow desire becomes tantamount to choosing absence—absence of family, community, and the self.

Because of the oppressions of slavery and the violence it forced on black women at the hands of white men, mixed raced characters of this era are typically depicted as the offspring of black mothers and white fathers. Necessarily, given both laws and social propriety, fathers typically were absent from the lives of their mixed raced children. Even in Iola's case, her father is present only when she is "white;" his death precipitates her mixed raced status, thereby continuing the custom of white paternal absence from the

lives of mixed raced progeny. Although slavery often forced the absence of the black mother specifically and of fathers generally, by the mid to late twentieth century, representations of mixed race share a common problem of absent fathers, both illustrating the gendered division of labor and challenging the reification of matrilineal heritage and the one-drop rule. Texts containing absent black fathers—*Caucasia* and *Resurrecting Mingus*, for example—confront the history and potential of black paternity, questioning long-standing constructions of black masculinity and demonstrating challenges to black identity based on an unknown ancestry. Texts in which the absent father is white—such as *Oreo*—offer alternative visions of black female/white male relationships than those based on the violent oppressions of slavery. In each case, because the female protagonists long for their absent fathers, the texts examine the impact of origins on racial identities and articulate utopian longings for a harmony of blackness and whiteness.

Such harmony is not often imagined in nineteenth century texts that were forced through an oppressive political climate to deal with oppositional constructions of race. Essentialist notions of race proliferated, not simply due to pseudo-scientific theories, but also due to the necessity of political alignments in a fight for basic human rights. Although notions of racial performance currently challenge biological bases of race, many nineteenth century texts offered essentialist arguments of race by highlighting racial performance of whiteness through passing. Harry's acknowledgement that "he had seen colored men with fair complexions anxious to lose their identity with the colored race and pose as white men" (126) suggests the essentialism that is inherent in these notions of racial performance. Those who choose to pass as white are described as losing their identities, as forsaking their fundamental selves in order to "pose" as something they

are not. Similar is Robert's claim that "it would be treason not only to the race, but to humanity, to have you ignoring your kindred and masquerading as a white man" (203). Racial passing becomes a crime not just against blackness but against nature itself; it becomes an attempt to deny what biology has dictated and also to deny the political and social history of oppression, and a white identity becomes simply a pose, a masquerade, a performance.

Although numerous nineteenth century descriptions of race as a performance imply passing for white, there are several instances where passing for black is suggested as a performance. In defense of his mother to Miss Delaney, Harry asserts, "She is not one who can't be white and won't be black" (278). Here, both white and black identities are synonymous with roles adopted and costumes assumed. Race becomes a chosen identity rather than an essential property. Harry does not claim that his mother is someone who "can't *pretend* to be white;" rather, he explicitly states that she is someone who could *be* white but chooses to be black instead. In this instance, then, the text challenges essentialist notions of race, highlighting the confusing and contradictory ways in which race has been constructed both in society and by the text itself. Harry, too, discusses accusations that he has performed blackness when he should admit to *being* white, admitting that he once had to "insist that [he] was colored in order to be permitted to remain" in the colored car in which he was riding (245). Harry's claim to blackness, then, is interrogated because his phenotype does not accord with his professed racial identity. He is assumed to be "performing" blackness rather than "possessing" it, demonstrating that it is possible, in fact, to pass as black. The text, like many others

dealing with mixed race, struggles with notions of racial ontology and racial performance.

Within *Iola Leroy*, racial performance highlights the possibility of social gain it affords (through passing for white) as well as the challenge it offers to traditionally essentialist notions of racial identity (through passing for black). Additionally, racial performance is undertaken within the novel for political purposes. By performing certain stereotypical characteristics of blackness, characters are able to achieve a political agenda, as they do by performing "market speech" in the first chapter. As Eric Lott has argued, "Black performance itself . . . was precisely 'performative,' a cultural invention, not some precious essence installed in black bodies; and for better or worse it was often a product of self-commodification, a way of getting along in a constricted world" (39). The text, then, illustrates the political value of racial performance, which allows individuals an opportunity to say one thing when they mean another, to act as one thing above another.

This ability to perform race hinges upon a fundamental mobility that not all individuals possess. Such mobility is facilitated, in large part, through phenotype, which offers another site of interrogation of racial representations in *Iola Leroy*. Because she has "Beautiful long hair [that] comes way down her back" and pretty blue eyes, Iola is seen as "jis' ez white ez anybody's in dis place" (38). Likewise, because her eyes are blue and her complexion as pale as white Dr. Gresham's, he sees no reason for Iola to persist in her claim that she is colored (232). In these instances, Iola's race becomes equated with her appearance. It is also appearance, this time Dr. Latimer's, that allows a challenge to essentialist notions of racial identity when one character insists that "there are tricks of

the blood which always betray" those who are black (229). Yet by being represented phenotypically, race becomes not simply a matter of appearance but also one of "character," reflecting common nineteenth century eugenicist notions regarding the interconnections between biology and behavior. As Captain Sybil asserts to Robert, "what is the use of your saying you're a colored man, when you are as white as I am, and as brave a man as there is among us" (43). By insisting that Robert should not consider himself colored because he is brave, blackness becomes equated with cowardice and whiteness with courage. Similarly, as in the description of Dr. Latimer, desirable character traits are seemingly augmented in inverse proportion to the amount of black blood in one's veins: "generations of blood admixture had effaced all trace of his negro lineage. His complexion was blonde, his eye bright and piercing, his lips firm and well moulded; his manner very affable; his intellect active and well stored with information" (239). Positive physical and mental characteristics, according to this description, result from racial intermixture, through the infusion of "superior white blood" into a "black" body—a pervasive eugenicist notion that situates the text within nineteenth century pseudo-scientific discourses of race and places it at odds with its aims of racial uplift.

This goal of racial uplift is reflected throughout the text in representations of race as a political choice. The political necessity of aligning oneself with blackness is best illustrated through Harry, who felt "as if two paths had suddenly opened before him, and he was forced to choose between them. On one side were strength, courage, enterprise, power of achievement, and memories of a wonderful past. On the other side were weakness, ignorance, poverty, and the proud world's scorn" (125). Of course, class is here collapsed into race, even though the novel elsewhere problematizes assumptions

which link poverty to blackness and wealth to whiteness. Nevertheless, Harry's dilemma succinctly illustrates assumptions about what whiteness and blackness offer and about what they are. Again, according to the dominant cultural imagination, whiteness has long been constructed as the ivory tower—mainly associated with positive characteristics, monolithic, impenetrable, pure, and strong. Blackness becomes the kettle black—associated with the negative, inferior, dirty, weak; it is imagined as a container for all that is not white. Though the novel describes the gains and losses that accompany passing for white versus passing for black, it also makes clear that not all the gains accompany a white identity. As Iola asserts, Harry "has greater advantages as a colored man" (218) since she idealistically believes, "To be...the leader of a race to higher planes of thought and action, to teach men clearer views of life and duty, and to inspire their souls with loftier aims, is a far greater privilege than it is to open the gates of material prosperity and fill every home with sensuous enjoyment" (219). Moreover, Harry acknowledges, "It was more than a matter of choice where he should stand on the racial question. He felt that he must stand where he could strike the most effective blow" for black freedom and improvement (126). Thus, for some, race becomes a political choice.[5] And within *Iola Leroy*, the most noble—though still problematized—choice is clearly that of blackness.

Blackness is represented in terms of nobility most clearly through Tom Anderson, who symbolizes the black martyr willing to surrender his life for others. Tom Anderson "was a man of herculean strength and remarkable courage" (40) who single-handedly saves his fellow soldiers by freeing their mired boat and pushing it toward open water; in

[5] Of course, we must question whether there is much choice available in the negotiation of identity and to whom such choices are allowed.

the process, he is rained upon by enemy bullets and mortally wounded. Through this act of heroism, Tom becomes not only a martyr but a role model as well. He, who is depicted as a dark-black man, becomes an object of praise and a subject to emulate. Additionally, he remains perfect in glory, rather than wasting away in a death caused by sickness and debilitation; he remains heroic and dies with strength and dignity. Tom's blackness, then, takes on the noble qualities of his character—qualities of strength, courage, dignity, selflessness, and goodness—once again problematizing the metaphorical associations of blackness and whiteness.

Yet Tom's blackness as nobility is tempered by the suggestion that it is in death that blacks achieve greatness. Indeed, before his death, Tom's blackness has been a physical defect. The text acknowledges, "on account of physical defects, instead of enlisting as a soldier, he was forced to remain a servant, although he felt as if every nerve in his right arm was tingling to strike a blow for freedom" (40). These defects may very well be the signs of Tom's blackness; after all, he is not educated and light-skinned like Robert and Harry, who are strongly encouraged to join the ranks of those soldiers struggling for freedom. Under the oppression of slavery, Tom's blackness was a hindrance to mobility and self-determination. The result of such oppressive force is a blackness that is deemed as defect, which remains an obstacle to be overcome in the quest for such mobility and self-determination. Tom's death, then, instead of or in addition to representing a noble martyrdom, may also represent the brutality inflicted on blackness, a brutality necessitated by a climate that refuses to acknowledge Tom's full humanity and participation.

Of course, the text struggles with these conflicting notions of race, not simply suggesting that blackness is negative. As Iola attests, there is greater merit to be found in her association with blackness than with whiteness, so long as material prosperity is not the only gain considered. In fact, throughout *Iola Leroy*, blackness often takes on distinctly positive characteristics and whiteness, in contrast, acquires negative associations. Because white men long denied their black children, whiteness, to some extent, becomes synonymous with a denial of family.[6] In fact, such would have been the case had either Iola or Harry chosen to pass into whiteness and surrender all efforts to locate her or his relatives. Because they both choose blackness and because this choice is necessitated by a desire for family, blackness becomes equated with an embrace of the family, of history, and of ancestors.

Additionally, the text also makes explicit that "white" religion is hypocritical. When Robert claims to not "take much stock in white folks' religion," Tom responds, "I think wen some of dem preachers brings de Bible 'round an' tells us 'bout mindin our marsters and not stealin' dere tings, dat dey preach to please de white folks..." (21). "White" religion, from the men's discussion, is depicted as hypocritical and self-serving. "Black" religion, in contrast, becomes a pure, valid, authentic religion because it involves neither hypocrisy nor oppression of others. This view of black spirituality, as the discussion of Jean Toomer in the next chapter will show, is influenced by eugenicist thought which attempted to portray blacks as more connected to nature and the spiritual and, hence, more capable of self-expression. Robert's claim that "the Bible is all right, but some of these church folks don't get the right hand of it" (22) clearly indicates a

[6] Whiteness also involves a denial of family in the sense that any non-white relatives are erased from personal and familial memory.

rejection of organized religion as the means to understand the divine. Through this character, the text rejects the intervention of white religion and white religious leaders into black spirituality and claims blacks' own ability to read and understand the word of God. Through the metaphor of religion—which may largely represent wisdom, justice, and salvation—these characters claim the superiority of blackness and the inferiority of whiteness. They problematize white religion, and, in so doing, they condemn those characteristics of whiteness that are not wise, just, or saved.

The text further problematizes whiteness, in the sense of a white phenotype, by not allowing it to become a fulfilled privilege for Iola. She sees "no necessity for proclaiming [the fact that she is black] on the house-top. Yet [she is] resolved that nothing shall tempt [her] to deny it" (208). Ann duCille argues that "claiming, rather than denying, the invisible racial mark becomes an act of empowerment and…a declaration of independence" (45).[7] Yet Iola can only claim this independence because her blackness *is* unmarked, freeing her to choose how she will be identified. Because of her refusal to hide her black racial ancestry, she encounters suspicion and rejection on the part of white supervisors and coworkers in the North who discover she is black. Thus, Iola's light complexion and blue eyes liberate her to control her identification, yet they do not change the fact that she is black since she is unwilling to deny that this is what she is.

Nevertheless, although both Iola and Harry choose blackness over whiteness, there is an assumption that blackness has the potential to be repulsive to them. Inherent in this assumption is the suggestion that blackness is, indeed, the kettle black—that it is dirty, distasteful, common, and despised. The fact that both characters overcome

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[7] duCille's diction declares that Iola's only racial mark is invisible, resulting in the assumption that her white phenotype cannot be racialized and contributing to the notion that whiteness is unraced.

whatever "natural" repulsion they may feel and step into blackness acts as a sign of the mobility and privilege allowed by phenotype. Had they not such freedom, they may not have surmounted their own internalized anxieties about blackness. Furthermore, although Iola claims that dark-skinned Lucille Delaney is her "ideal woman," readers can assume that their model for emulation is not Lucille but Iola herself. Though Iola may admire Lucille's qualities, she escapes Lucille's confinement in a dictated, phenotypical blackness. This blackness, though ostensibly offering an example of the race's potential, is also constructed problematically. Because Harry initially feels repulsed at the idea of associating closely with blacks, his eventual realization that he loves Lucille appears to be a textual inconsistency that readers must overlook. In selecting a dark-skinned woman as his wife, Harry exercises the privilege that he has as a light-skinned man making a political choice to align himself with blackness. His marriage to Lucille can be seen as a gesture which solidifies his claims to blackness and which reinforces the desirability of black women as well as their right to participate in social conventions that will protect their morality rather than make them vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Positively, this marriage may function as a demonstration that black men, even those who look white, do not always or necessarily desire white women, thereby commenting upon the social myth which suggests all black men lust after white women. Yet the fact remains that between Harry and Lucille there exists none of the symbolized sexual energy of Dr. Latimer's marriage proposal to Iola. In fact, Harry's "proposal" to Lucille is filled with comedy, misunderstanding, and the explicit claim that "there is a great deal of misplaced sentiment at weddings" (277). The proposal is void of sexuality and sincere sentiment, reinforcing the idea that Lucille cannot be as ideal as Iola.

Iola, furthermore, although accepting blackness, is placed outside the bounds of nineteenth century constructions of blackness. She is refined and educated, retains memories of a privileged childhood, and is courted by a white man. The novel's initial narrative, however, suggests the impossibility of a successful interracial marriage. The marriage of Eugene and Marie, Iola's parents, is one of inequality, one that is both metaphorically and literally a relation between master and slave. Thus, the text suggests the unlikelihood that blackness, in close association with whiteness, will be allowed true happiness. Because Iola marries Dr. Latimer, and because their marriage is a partnership between equals, both socially and racially, they are allowed such happiness. Of course, although Iola contains both blackness and whiteness within her, she finds no difficulty in ignoring her whiteness once she is made aware of her blackness. The notion that blackness and whiteness in close association will prohibit happiness often results in the tragic mulatto character type for those individuals who wish to claim their whiteness and/or deny their blackness. Iola is allowed happiness and life because she does not acknowledge a racial conflict within herself, because she accepts the one-drop rule, and because she marries a "black" man. This access to blackness through heterosexuality is a prominent trope in discussions of mixed race, suggesting that mixed women may be considered as women through their blackness—which, of course, is a notion distinctly at odds with nineteenth century dictates that prohibited black women's classification as women at all. Thus, Iola avoids the tragic mulatto's fate, which literary narratives historically reserve for those who reject hypodescent and insist on maintaining claims to whiteness.

Race in the nineteenth century imagination was a complex idea, as its literary representations attest. This complexity is clear in Harry's discussion of his racial identity. Within one paragraph, Harry asserts that his racial identity is essential, that is, a matter of biology ("after I found that I was colored"); he asserts that it is based on desire and kinship ("I would be more apt to find my family if I joined a colored regiment" and "love for my mother overcame all repugnance on my part"); and he asserts that it is both a personal and a political choice ("at first I felt a shrinking from taking the step" and "Now that I have linked my fortunes to the race I intend to do all I can for its elevation").[8] This textual confusion as to the nature of race is really a reflection of complex notions on racial identity that were prevalent during the nineteenth century. Harper's text, overall, offers an equally complex discussion of this identity, a discussion that highlights the intricate and at times contradictory assumptions on the nature of blackness and whiteness as well as assumptions that presume no one would willing climb into the kettle black.

Continued Crystallization

These nineteenth century crystallizations of race continue to influence ideologies of race and mixed race. Perpetuated in the cultural imagination and taken up by literary artists, metaphors of blackness and whiteness remain complex and often contradictory. Likewise, the ways in which these metaphors influence understandings of mixed race is equally complex. Although the social space may be opening for notions of racial mixture that reject the hierarchy and opposition traditionally associated with race, stereotypical assumptions regarding blackness and whiteness continue. In fact, as the discussion of Jean Toomer in the next chapter illustrates, these nineteenth century crystallizations of

[8] See Harry's discussion with his mother on page 202.

race extended into the twentieth century and beyond, shaping notions of racial difference and racial mixture.

CHAPTER 3
LINES OF CONTACT AND COHERENCE: MERIDIANS IN THE WORK OF JEAN TOOMER

Points of Departure

Apparently, my former mother-in-law was disturbed when her white son brought me home to meet the family. She saw my brown skin as a sign of extreme, perhaps insurmountable, difference and remarked on whether she could accept a "mulatto" daughter-in-law. If I had been Asian or Latina, she admitted, I would have been easier to accept; presumably in those cases I would have had whiter skin. Because my brown skin was so readily visible, it took precedence over my upbringing and experience, both of which were mainly within white communities. Ironically, since I had attended private schools throughout my life and had lived with my white mother and grandmother, I likely had less exposure to diversity than her son, who had attended a racially diverse public high school. Nevertheless, my skin was a marker—perhaps the ultimate marker—of difference that catapulted me outside of my own history and into a history of her imagination, as her use of the word "mulatto" demonstrated. The word, linked as it is with this country's violently oppressive past, was carried into the present with all of its history in tow—a history filled with oppositional and hierarchical notions of difference. Her use of this word, as well as her assumptions regarding my difference, illustrate both the power of language to isolate and divide as well as the ease with which we allow a body to represent the whole individual.

Of course, we are more than our bodies say we are, just as we are more than a racial category can describe. Our bodies and our identities together play with socially-established boundaries—sometimes they compete; sometimes they confuse; often they challenge long-standing ideas that we take as given, as my former mother-in-law did regarding my identity. We exist on borders of difference and sameness, of past and present, of present and future. We may live on lines set up to divide black from white and male from female; instead of dividing, however, we may unite the two regions; we may be seen as the point where two halves unite into a whole rather than where those halves are split. We may function as mediators, as meridians, as ones who, in the words of mixed raced Harlem Renaissance writer Jean Toomer, "can balance strong contrasts, who can combine opposing forms and forces in significant unity" (*Essentials*, XLIV). Adamantly refusing to conform to the black identity that was thrust upon him, Toomer sought to destabilize notions of race, a project that he attempts but which falters in *Cane* (1923), as it couples essentializations of blackness with its confrontations of racist hierarchies and histories. Such a tension within the text reflects Toomer's own struggles with articulating an identity that acknowledges its various components while attempting to maintain a proximity to the creativity and spirituality that popular eugenicist and social Darwinist theories associated with blackness, which he feared he lacked. Because he did not feel black but had been defined as non-white, he sought the combination of "opposing forms and forces into a significant unity" through much of his life and work.

Such a utopian project was Toomer's self-defined artistic task in his book *Cane* and in his poem "The Blue Meridian," a task in keeping with the aims of many modernists prominent during the time Toomer wrote these works. The era between the

1920s and 1940s roughly isolates the modernist period in literature and the arts and includes the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. During the modernist period, many people in the United States faced alienation and self-doubt as society began a large-scale shift away from communally oriented agrarian life toward technological and industrial advancements that would change the way individuals saw themselves, their communities, and the nation. Disillusioned and alienated, many intellectuals sought to make sense of a seemingly chaotic world through their art; at the same time, many looked to modern (as in contemporary) life as evidence of an evolutionary progression from what was viewed as the primitivism of the past to modern and future advancement. Concomitant with these complex views of modernity as both fragmenting and progressive were parallel ideas regarding the past as a place of wholeness and connection as well as a place of the archaic and static. Using increasingly widespread and popularized ideas regarding evolution, notions of social progress and stasis were applied to social groups through eugenics and social Darwinism. These ideologies relied on long-standing associations between dualities, such as connections made between races and their presumed characteristics—for example, those associations summarized in the metaphors of the ivory tower and the kettle black. During the modernist period, certain groups could be deemed pre-modern—even though they existed alongside their modern counterparts—through their connection to certain "primitive" ideas, lifestyles, occupations, even geographical locations. For many North American modernists, rural black "folk" were the contemporary representation of a primitive past; they were history existing temporally alongside the present. Rural black folk, then, were represented as a primitive group that was dying under the march of modernization while whites and urban

blacks were being carried by the march into a progressive future. Of course, given the complex ideas regarding the modern and pre-modern, rural blacks were thought to embody both the negative associations with the primitive—a sense of oldness, lack of progress, lack of civilized reason and advancement, etc.—as well as the primitive's positive associations—a sense of innocence, innate spirituality, capability of sensual expression, connection with the natural world, boundless creative energy. These positive characteristics, moreover, were all assumed to be dying in the fragmenting chaos of modernity. Thus, many modernist intellectuals sought access to these positive characteristics assumed inherent in "primitive" races in order that advancing individuals might enter the future with the sense of wholeness and self-expression allowed by a perceived past.

In lamenting this potential loss of the black folk spirit in the face of modernization, Toomer and other modernist intellectuals also recognized that the future was full of potential. Toomer's vision was a utopian one that relied on eugenicist notions of human development to suggest the possibility of racial evolution. Through this vision, Toomer attempted to decrystallize (some) accepted notions of race and to champion the possibility of a new understanding of race and racial categories in the United States; these efforts advocated a New American identity that would act as a fusion of diverse types and that would acknowledge the American history of racial mixture. In this notion of uniting the disparate, Toomer is an artist whose work aids analysis of many later twentieth century writers of mixed race, and his work is a direct precursor to current multiracial discourse that seeks to unify seemingly oppositional races within the bodies of mixed raced individuals. Such discourse claims that those of mixed race offer the prospect of

moving beyond race and racial categories by blending diverse elements into a unified whole. Elimination of racial categories, this discourse claims, leaves open the possibility of uniting people within the "human" race or based on American nationality in the United States—the former being a utopian notion that, at times, ignores differences, perpetuates colorblindness, and fosters homogenization and the latter being a problematic notion that attempts to eliminate racial conflict by supplanting it with the equally divisive ideology of nationalism.

Earlier in the twentieth century, many modernist intellectuals sought to re-imagine a national identity and also looked to race in efforts to reconnect intellectually and artistically with a source of creativity and meaning in an alienating and chaotic time. For mixed raced Toomer, such a goal was also personal as he desired connection to his black heritage and the positive "pre-modern" characteristics of rural black life. After a trip to Sparta, Georgia, his first immersion into black southern culture,[1] Toomer produced the first fragments of *Cane*, and, with them, began his search for connection to an unknown and (he seems to have feared) unembodied black ancestry. This "blood" connection would allow him creativity and self-expression without jeopardizing his existence as a modern intellectual striding into the progressive future. As Tace Hedrick writes, Toomer—like many other modernists—was

> steeped in an intellectual and cultural milieu which felt the express need to connect itself with some 'primitive' or premodern source of creative energies . . . for many modernists at the time, a world set 'back' in time might provide a different, and even protective, space from which to derive a sense of wholeness over against the seemingly fragmented and increasingly secularized modern world. (39)

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[1] Toomer was raised in the elite mixed raced society that existed in Washington, DC, at the turn of the century.

Toomer's self-highlighted racial mixture connected him with the life and creativity of the black American past while ensuring against his own intellectual and artistic demise as that past died. Although Toomer's interest in this primitive past was in part personal, he also sought a general renewal of the spiritual and sensual expression that was being ignored if not actively spurned by an industrializing society:

> They are passing. Let us grab and hold them while there is still time. Segregation and laws may retard this solution. But in the end, segregation will either give way, or it will kill. Natural preservations do not come from unnatural laws. . . . A few generations from now, the negro will still be dark, and a portion of his psychology will spring from this fact, but in all else he will be a conformist to the general outlines of American civilization, or of American chaos. (quoted in Hutchinson 234)[2]

Amidst the rural black folk of Sparta, Toomer was able to glimpse a way of life he felt was vanishing and to record this life in *Cane*: "O Negro slaves, dark purple ripened plums / Squeezed, and bursting in the pine-wood air / Passing, before they stripped the old tree bare / One plum was saved for me, one seed becomes / An everlasting song" (14). The text insists that the rural folk life of blacks—expressed throughout *Cane* in images of dusk, darkness, purple, pine, and cane—was passing, as it was for all America in the face of modernization. At the same time, the persona in "Song of the Son" links himself with his black ancestors, providing through his body a link between past and future; using agrarian images that depict blacks as a full component of the natural landscape, the persona is depicted as a seed that should carry the essence and positive characteristics of blackness into the future. However, in "Harvest Song," he cannot fully connect with his blackness; he works alongside the black workers in the fields, yet he cannot call to them, nor can he hear their calls to him. Additionally, his eyes

[2] Toomer to Waldo Frank, box 3, folder 84, Jean Toomer Papers.

are "caked with dust" and his "throat is dry. [He] hunger[s]." When he finally cracks a grain, "it has no taste to it" (*71*). Thus, the poem's speaker can find no access to blackness, to the essential spirit he believes it offers. He can merely hold the shell, the outer crust, but cannot attain the life it should hold inside. Moreover, the poem's images suggest that the persona himself is merely a husk, someone whose identity has been conceived as blackness but someone who, nevertheless, cannot express blackness from within. The alienation and loss of spirituality suggested by this poem, then, make it (hyper-) modernist in a sense; the poem's speaker cannot access blackness and this blackness, itself, is passing under the grinding wheels of modernization. Blackness is the bloodied victim of the ever-advancing machine he describes in the poem "Reapers."[3]

As a response to anxieties regarding the loss of the past and its imagined wholeness, *Cane* aims to gather the gems of the past and use them as treasures for the future while it simultaneously laments the potential loss of folk expression, which is a prominent theme in many of the poems throughout, most notably "Song of the Son" and "Georgia Dusk." The former poem sings of the importance of black heritage and folk culture. The Negro slaves, it argues, and their connection to what Toomer considered spiritually authentic were "passing." Yet before they passed away, "before they stripped the old tree bare," they saved one plum and "one seed becomes an everlasting song, a singing tree," preserved within the language of the poem. From that song of the son emerge "softly the souls of slavery, what they were, and what they are" (14). "Georgia Dusk," speaks of ancestral memory, those memories of "king and caravan, High-priests, an ostrich, and a juju-man" kept alive in the midst of sawmills and buzz-saws. As the

[3] In "Reapers," Toomer writes, "Black horses drive a mower through the weeds./And there, a field rat, startled, squealing bleeds./His belly close to ground. I see the blade,/Blood-stained, continue cutting weeds

blacks make "folk-songs from soul sounds," clearly implying a connection to their natural selves, they complete a spiritual union above the "sacred whisper of the pines." Additionally, the poem suggests that, through their spirituality, the singers are able to make the profane holy, to "give virgin lips to cornfield concubines" (15).

Cane is a montage of genres—combining poetry, vignettes, and a longer story that had been envisioned originally for the stage. Its three sections move the reader through the spaces in which blacks found themselves at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States. Part I is set in the rural South, where, according to the author, black and mixed raced individuals still can encounter what is both beautiful and violent about their history. Here, they can connect with the folk culture of their forebears, but here they also must contend with the racism those forebears suffered. Part II takes place in the urban North, where the characters are disconnected from their past and alienated from others by the pressures of modernity. Part III consists of "Kabnis," the story of a mixed raced man who leaves the urban North to better understand and connect with his origins in the rural South. Kabnis, unable to fully embrace the South, which is depicted with both its nurturing folk culture and its brutal racism, illustrates the modern dilemma of entering the future without forsaking the past. This dilemma is addressed throughout *Cane*, as Toomer addresses philosophical and ontological questions regarding the meanings of race within given spatial and temporal contexts—namely, within the text, Toomer aims to understand black life in the rural South and the urban North at a time when society was being carried by the tides of modernization. In addition, Toomer seeks to work through issues of racial mixture in an effort to carry what is valuable about black folk culture—deemed to be the

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and shade" (*Collected Poems* 23).

primitive link with the past—into the progressive white culture that threatened rural blackness with demise. *Cane* both privileges racial mixture and exhibits significant anxieties surrounding it. Within *Cane*, racial mixture, despite seeming for Toomer to be a natural occurrence when people were freed from inhibitions, often results in tragedy due to social prohibitions. Moreover, *Cane* demonstrates the potential of racial mixture itself to jeopardize the folk spirit of black Americans when racially mixed individuals abandon their connection to their black heritage.

Modernist discourses such as Toomer's sought a union of various "types" of people under a nationalist umbrella that maintained many dominant racist assumptions. During the modernist period, such work was eugenicist in nature and was being attempted by numerous intellectuals, artists, and officials both in the United States and in other countries—for example, in Mexico where the work of artists such as Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera and of officials such as José Vasconcelos, Minister of Education, attempted to rescue the positive characteristics of the indigenous population, who embodied the past, before this population met its demise. Toomer, similarly concerned with the past and the future, paused in the present to encapsulate the moment in which one must determine how to bring what is valuable about yesterday into always approaching tomorrow. *Cane* is the capsule in which this moment is captured; it is the fulcrum between the past, assumed to be vanishing, and the future, assumed to be imminent. While it grapples with the anxieties of modernity, the text also argues that the past must be carried into the future, that the present always contains traces of the past. However, while the text demonstrates that history is not linear, it still struggles with what it believes to be a linearity between the past, present, and future. Although it

acknowledges that the past's treasures can be carried into the present moment and beyond, it still envisions the present as a moment of balance and shift. Within this vision, Toomer draws upon images and metaphors of meridians—metaphors of in-betweenness, of dusk and dawn, of black and white, of male and female—and uses mixed raced identities, including the metaphor of the New American, and mixed raced relationships to isolate these meridians—these points of contact, departure, and change. He uses these meridian images to play with understandings of race and gender, with notions of difference and hierarchy, and with the possibilities of self-expression. His meridian metaphors, in turn, provide a point of departure from reified notions of race and difference for analysis of later writers concerned with mixed race.

Mixed raced characters in general and mixed raced women in particular function as meridian figures within *Cane*, and their portrayals reveal modernist struggles to foster full self-expression, to find meaning in ambiguities, and to locate points of balance within oppositions. In fact, within *Cane* "women are more metaphors than people. As metaphors they are ambiguous and multitextured. They are representative of the Southern black lyrical world that is dying; they are the objects of male desire; they are the battleground on which white and black males contend for dominance and validity" (Peckham 283). The text's treatment of these women, then, is consistent with understandings of women as sites of contestation between races and among men. These women's bodies, as in other texts of mixed race, become the ground on which the fate of races is decided and the perpetuation or demise of races is assured. The illustration of women in *Cane* exhibits tensions over modern fears of alienation and fragmentation and highlights modern anxieties regarding the future.

Overall, *Cane* questions—notably through the alienation its male and female characters experience in attempting to relate—the utopian visions of the future that it proposes through racial mixture. However, Toomer's poem "The Blue Meridian," which was published in 1932 but over which he had labored for at least fifteen years, expands his utopian vision of the future as the site where individuals may overcome alienation and connect, both with each other and with their full selves, embodying meridians that unite disparate parts. Although less visionary in its utopian ideology than "The Blue Meridian, *Cane* is visionary in its unique form—which plays with the genres of poetry, drama, and fiction—and also in its aim to locate a site for renewed self-expression at a time when Toomer, among others, found the world alienating and even dangerous to the understanding and articulation of identities. When Toomer published *Cane* in 1923, it was a brilliant success, and Toomer became known as a new voice for black Americans. Writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, who had or would become significant voices in the Harlem Renaissance, were notably influenced by the book, and numerous other black and white authors greatly appreciated its merits. White author Sherwood Anderson called Toomer's early efforts the first work that seemed to him to be "really negro."[4] Anderson's statement is ironic, given the fact that Toomer never claimed to be black himself. It is true, however, that Toomer drew inspiration from the black community, having said that

> within the last two or three years . . . my growing need for artistic expression has pulled me deeper and deeper into the Negro group. As my powers of receptivity increased, I found myself loving it in a way that I could never love the other. It has stimulated and fertilized everything of worth that I have done.[5]

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[4] Letter from Anderson to Toomer, dated December 22, 1922.
[5] Letter from Toomer to *The Liberator*, dated August 19, 1922.

As *Cane* and many of Toomer's other works confront the realities of race-based hierarchies, they concurrently exhibit hierarchies based on essentialisms of blackness that were common during the modernist period. Toomer, like many others influenced by eugenicist and social Darwinist ideologies, believed blacks had more ability or tendency to express their emotions and release such expressions physically.[6] Perhaps in part because of these essentialisms linking blacks with the body, the intellectual, urban, mixed raced Toomer could never strictly identify himself solely with the black community. Instead, Toomer's black identity was thrust upon him from the outside. Publishers and fellow authors identified him as black, and at times he allowed such identification; on other occasions, however, Toomer insisted that identifying him as black was an inadequate representation of his heritage, and he thoroughly resisted the notion that he might identify as black to the exclusion of his other ancestries. When Toomer did resist what he deemed the restricting identification of singular blackness, he was claimed to have repudiated his black heritage and denied his blackness.

Scholars have speculated on several reasons why Toomer may have "denied" his blackness. It is possible that Toomer's grandfather, P.B.S. Pinchback, lied about his heritage, claiming African-American ancestry in order to win political support for his office as governor of Louisiana during the Reconstruction period following the Civil War. Toomer himself could have felt that inclusion of his works in wider categories of literature may have been easier had he not been identified as a Negro. Similarly, Toomer may have felt that denial of his blackness may have allowed him to escape threat from

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[6] It might also be assumed from his statement that Toomer prioritized whiteness and blackness as if there were no other races to be considered. This, however, would be an essentialization of Toomer's beliefs, for he clearly acknowledged the many races that were joined within his own body.

white supremacist groups, which were gaining strength at the time Toomer published his ground-breaking first book. Alternatively, Toomer may have wanted to write as a "human," to avoid restrictions implicit in a strictly defined racial identification. Jewish author Waldo Frank, Toomer's friend and mentor, wrote in a letter to Toomer, "You take your race or your races naturally, as the white man takes his." Frank, clearly, is acknowledging the fact that whiteness can be ignored in a way that blackness cannot since whiteness is taken to be the universal referent. For Toomer to "take his race naturally," then, implies that he did not limit his identification to that which was only black. However, it was precisely Toomer's ability to identify with and communicate the experience of black Americans in *Cane* that encouraged others to label him as a black man. Finally, Toomer may have reached a point where racial identification itself was undesirable to him. This final possibility is among the most likely, given Toomer's attitudes—about race in general and mixed race in particular—which he delineated in many of his letters, in his unpublished, semi-autobiographical novels, and his works such as *Cane* and "The Blue Meridian."

Far from denying his blackness during the years surrounding *Cane*'s publication, as most critics have mistakenly claimed, Toomer adopted a position that acknowledged none of his ancestral "races" above the others. He wrote:

> As near as I can tell, there are seven race bloods within this body of mine. French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish, and Indian. . . . One half of my family is definitely white, the other, definitely colored. For my own part, I have lived equally amid the two groups. And, I alone, as far as I know, have striven for a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling...Viewed from the world of race distinctions, I take the color of whatever group I am sojourning in. As I become known, I shall doubtless be classed as Negro. I shall neither fight nor resent it. There will

> be more truth than they know in what they say, for my writing takes much of its worth from that source.[7]

Despite Toomer's claim to accept classification as a Negro, it is true that on several occasions he explicitly contends that he is "not a Negro." He once announced, "As for being a Negro, this of course, I am not—neither biologically nor socially. . . . In biological fact, I am, as are all Americans, a member of a new people that is forming in this country. If we call this people the Americans, then biologically and racially I am an American...As long as I have been conscious of the issues involved, I have never identified myself with any single racial or social group."[8] Toomer seems not to have intended a denial of his blackness by such contentions; rather, he intended an affirmation of his composite parts. Thus, Toomer struggled with claiming an identity that was both diverse and American during a time when being American meant being white. For Toomer, being modern involved a confrontation with "old" bodies and new possibilities.[9] These possibilities, in turn, suggested a unification of what formerly had been distinct: various races in one body, diverse peoples in one nation. In articulating this potential unity, Toomer offered visions of a New America, a vision of America that moved beyond the divisions of race, gender, and nationalism to the utopian understanding of universal humanity and unification suggested by the meridian metaphor.

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[7] Letter from Toomer to *Double Dealer* editor John McClure, dated June 30, 1922.
[8] From *A Fiction and Some Facts*, a privately published autobiography of 1931.
[9] By "old," I am referring to those bodies that were not considered new, modern—namely, the bodies of minorities. Rather, these bodies were marked as primitive, as bodies that belonged to history and which,

Dividing Lines

This meridian metaphor functions in *Cane* and "The Blue Meridian" in contrast to accepted ideas of divisive difference between races, genders, bodies, even eras—confronting the isolation and alienation that accompanied modernity. *Cane* articulates the problems and potentialities of modernism as well as possible responses to modernity and modernization and confronts the challenge of locating within modernizing society those bodies that had been coded as not modern, as pre-modern and even primitive—the bodies of rural black folk in the U.S. South. Faced with the challenge of resituating these primitive bodies, of redefining these "old" bodies as new or of suggesting the necessary site these old bodies occupied in a modern map of America, Toomer articulated a New American identity—his most utopian meridian metaphor—that likely was generated by personal motivations, for his was a body that did not fit compactly into the modern world. Instead, his body seeped across the boundaries of the molds he had been offered in which to situate himself. Having been characterized throughout his literary career as a black man, Toomer nevertheless did not feel that he embodied an "authentic" blackness. He did, unsuccessfully, attempt to grasp a black heritage that, through notions that primitivized blackness and were proliferated through modernist discourses, he felt would bring him access to his own spirituality and creativity. In seeking to unify opposites within himself, he sought to become a point of contact and metamorphosis, a meridian, like America itself. Thus, though he claimed to seek the eradication of nationalisms, he—like many other artists and intellectuals during the modernist era—considered America as the site where cultures met and merged,

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ostensibly, should not exist alongside the "modern" bodies (those that were conflated with potential and progress) of the present.

forming a new culture, a new America. Toomer clearly involved himself in the modernist project of restructuring various parts in order to form something new, in this case, an understanding of American-ness that was decidedly multiracial.

Toomer, however, essentially abandoned his struggle to promote the vision of a universal race after his introduction to Quakerism and his involvement with the Society of Friends beginning in 1940. His work during this period clearly shows an alignment with whiteness, and the images of his poems during this phase associate whiteness with higher spirituality and goodness and associate darkness with negativity and degradation. There is an insistence on both white and blue as positive, indicating that Toomer has shifted markedly from his earlier use in *Cane* of the colors dusk and purple to signify spirituality and a positive connection to the natural world. In fact, during this phase in Toomer's writing, he reverses his earlier reverence for nature and, instead, offers his first degrading image of it: "As the white bird leaves the dirty nest" (*Collected Poems* 94). Clearly, the natural world has lost its positive connotations here; in "The Chase," Toomer envisions a white bird that must free itself from the grim of its material existence in order to "merge in the blue" (94). Toomer offers the ascetic vision that the soul must unchain itself from the degradation of the body in order to reach transcendence. Additional organic images, like those offered in "Our Growing Day," seem to suggest that humans should be "plowed" and "planted" like the fertile earth. No longer is the mere connection to the natural world the assurance of spiritual health; rather, the human body becomes the "hard and encrusted" ground in which the soul is planted. Only by being plowed "deeply" will this ground enable the seed to "spring up and grow splendidly." Here, fertility and darkness are positioned as opposites and the positive growth is directed upwards and

outwards—rather than downwards, as roots into the soil, which is a prominent image in *Cane* (97).

Before this period in which Toomer sought to transcend the material world and identify himself based solely on spirituality, he struggled to define himself in a way that would connect him—socially white—with his ancestral blackness, which popular discourses of the time associated with creativity and spirituality.[10] In so doing, he called for a re-identification of all Americans that would incorporate the diversity found in almost all Americans' ancestry. This "American" vision of Toomer's is truly modernist in that it functions as a response to the alienation and chaos prevalently felt during this era. Toomer's American vision and his work in *Cane* and "The Blue Meridian," like the responses of numerous other artists and intellectuals of the period, attempt to apprehend connections and order, to move beyond imposed boundaries, and to find meaning in the midst of the seemingly meaningless. Additionally, it, like other modernist works, was a distinct break with what had proceeded it, both in form and in its often positive representation of rural black life.

There is evidence in *Cane* of Toomer's desire to locate a new site for expression of his notion of an "American" identity since the text explores the restrictions placed on individuals due to racism and sexism. *Cane* is, in part, a book about self-expression and the forces that work to limit such expression, a theme that was clearly important to Toomer, given his struggles to define himself in more inclusive terms than society normally allows. For Toomer, such self-expression involved uniting in meridian form the disparate components of his heritage; as he wrote, "in life nothing is only physical; there

[10] Moreover, Toomer's name was self-created. Originally named Nathan Eugene Toomer after his absent father, he eventually took the name Jean.

is also the symbolical. White and Black. West and East. North and South. Light and Darkness. In general, the great contrasts. The pairs of opposites. And I, together will all other I's, am the great reconciler" (quoted in Jones 11). In both Toomer's life and his writings through his involvement, which ended in 1936, with the spiritualist and mystic G.I. Gurdjieff,[11] this metaphor of meridian existence is prominent as he undertakes the modernist project of reconciling opposites into a new whole. Such reconciliation is clearly attempted in *Cane*, as Toomer juxtaposes black and white, North and South, male and female—those pairs of opposites that both dominate and restrict lives. For example, in "Seventh Street," Toomer provides a juxtaposition of white and black lives, "a crude-boned, soft-skinned wedge of nigger life breathing its loafer air, jazz songs and love, thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington" (41). Blackness, then, has the ability to "split" the "stale soggy wood" of the white world and infuse it with black life, black "rhythms." It is clear that Toomer—like many other modernists influenced by studies in anthropology, evolution, and social Darwinism—found blacks to be more in touch with their emotions and physical selves; they had the potential to infuse such life into white urbanity, but they also faced the threat of being subdued by that white world that was the vanguard of modernization and urbanism. The characters in Part II, for instance, all suffer the inhibition of their physical and emotional selves due to their distance from the South and from its land. The city, then, becomes a threatening force with the power to limit self-expression and foster alienation.

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[11] Toomer's ideas regarding mysticism, cosmic consciousness, and self-realization were facilitated through his association with Gurdjieff, who founded a commune of which Toomer was a member for some years.

In contrast, the rural South, though vanishing in the face of modernization, remains in Toomer's imagination a place where blacks are connected to the earth and therefore capable of knowing and expressing their inner selves and desires. Although Toomer's positive representation of rural southern black life in many of *Cane*'s poems was a marked departure from traditional representations of black Americans, he did not completely reject stereotypical representations. In truth, his depictions of rural blacks imply that they, along with women, are more natural, physical, and emotional. Whites, then, become depicted as more industrial and intellectual. Thus, the juxtaposition of rural and urban, North and South becomes synonymous with the juxtaposition of black and white, a juxtaposition also assumed to occur within mixed raced bodies such as Toomer's. Although blacks had the potential to infuse "life" and spirituality into white society, the transplantation of rural blacks into urban centers threatened to remove them from the sustenance they drew from a close connection with nature and the earth. Similar anxieties surrounded mixed raced bodies; because Toomer feared that his own access to the fruits of "primitive" blackness had been impeded and because modernist thought held that such blackness faced certain demise, he sought to grasp these benefits and carry them into the future, blending blackness and whiteness into a modern hybrid symbolized by his own body.

In "Box Seat," whose characters are removed from rural black southern life, mixed raced Dan and Muriel are prevented from expressing their true feelings and are separated with an almost physical barrier by Mrs. Pribby, the white proprietor of Muriel's boarding house, whose knock on the door becomes a "cool thick glass between them" (63). Muriel, especially, is confined by social pressures; the house in which she lives

becoming a "sharp-edged, massed, metallic house. Bolted" about them (60). When they arrive at the theater, the people seem to Dan to be machines bolted into their seats because they have internalized the social demands that restrict their natural selves. Only one large black woman with a "soil-soaked fragrance" and "strong roots [that] sink down and spread under the river and disappear in blood-lines that waver south" is still connected to her true self (65). She alone is not confined to her box seat, not locked into the mechanics of the city, but violates the spatial boundaries that are dictated. Seated next to her, Dan lets his hands follow her south-bound roots, "his heart beats violently. He places his palms upon the earth to cool them...He sees all the people in the house rush to the walls to listen to the rumble. A new-world Christ is coming up" (65). Encountering what he considers to be authentic blackness, Dan tries to capture some of its essence, to place his hands upon its soil to cool the fever and restlessness he experiences in the city's mechanical grasp. In his reverie for this authentic blackness, Dan senses the coming of the messiah, a modernist response that links salvation through connection to the past, to the earth, to an essential primitivism rarely encountered in the city. Dan realizes he, like this woman, does not fit within the boundaries and confines of the city, a place where emotion, even violence, is not experienced authentically but only through caricature, as the fighting dwarves on stage become a grotesque stand-in for physical and emotional expression. Muriel remains caught between social pressures—which dictate that she must accept a blood-spattered rose offered her by one of the dwarves—and her desire to express her true feelings of revulsion at the offer. And Dan, disgusted by Muriel's stasis, leaves the theater with the shout that "Jesus was once a leper" (69)—suggesting that through their isolation and conformity, individuals reject the means of their salvation.

Through Dan's response to "authentic" blackness and his insistence that individuals disallow connection, Toomer attempts to highlight, and thereby erase, boundaries.

Toomer's aim to juxtapose dichotomies and eliminate boundaries points to meridians between seemingly diverse locations and is aptly illustrated when Dan tells Muriel, "Life bends joy and pain, beauty and ugliness, in such a way that no one may isolate them. No one should want to. Perfect joy, or perfect pain, with no contrasting element to define them, would mean a monotony of consciousness, would mean death" (62). As joy and pain define each other, then, so do black and white, North and South. *Cane* illustrates that ideas are defined in terms of their opposites, that dualities constitute each other. Toomer's desire to reject fixed identifications and to embrace dualities, a desire seen in his own life and in his work, reflects utopian ideologies, and Toomer clearly saw himself as representative of a New American type. His utopian New American metaphor of racial mixture presented a contrast with traditional depictions that offered only tragedy or conformity to those of mixed race. This New American, then, would allow a fusion of opposites, would accelerate a consciousness that refused to impose a hierarchy within dichotomies and, instead, would represent a "new" utopian individual who might usher in a social utopia. This utopia is most hopefully mapped out in "The Blue Meridian"; in *Cane*, which ultimately is ambivalent about the possibility of achieving such a utopia, racial mixture is surrounded by anxiety as well as potential, and the text often illustrates the idea that race mixing leads to tragedy. However, the tragedy suggested is not necessitated because of any *inherent* conflict between races but because of the forces of modernization that limit connections among people and because of societal pressures that restrict free expression of one's true self and nature.

In the story "Bona and Paul," for instance, the title characters are confined by society into fixed racial groups that allow no expression of attraction between those groups. Paul, a biracial young man, and Bona, a Southern white young woman transplanted in the North, are drawn to each other by a mutual attraction. Yet Paul understands that "people saw, not attractiveness in his dark skin, but difference. Their stares, giving him to himself, filled something long empty within him, and were like green blades sprouting in his consciousness" (76). He recognizes that he is defined by others as a black man—and that he is considered overtly sexual as a result—despite his mixed heritage. This, at least, offers a sense of self, even if it is not of his own creation. And, like the promise of new grass in the springtime, this definition can offer hope for the future, provided he maintain the path chosen for him. Paul, though, does not walk the straight and narrow path that would define him as a member of the black community without permission to transgress his boundaries. After Bona expresses her "love" for him, he decides to risk a relationship with her. As he and Bona leave a restaurant together, Paul runs back to inform the doorman, "I came back to tell you, brother, that white faces are petals of roses. That dark faces are petals of dusk. That I am going out and gather petals" (80). However, when Paul attempts to rejoin Bona, he discovers that she is gone. She has been overcome by her own socially induced sense of propriety. Thus, though these characters attempt to foster the outward expression of their inward selves, although they exist on the cusp of possibilities for breaking through barriers, they are thwarted by the dictates of society. Although they exist as meridian figures who might link north and south, black and white, male and female they are expected to live on one side of the dividing line—Paul must be a northern black man and Bona a southern

white woman, each isolated from the other and locked into the confines of social expectations. They cannot reach the full expression of themselves within the confines of the urban center where they live, nor can they achieve the potential Toomer imagined for race mixture.

Other characters in *Cane* are equally doomed to suffer because they dare transgress the boundaries that society dictates based upon race. There is Becky, for example, "the white woman who had two Negro sons" (7). Because of her obvious relationship with a black man, the town ostracizes her and her sons. Yet the townspeople recognize their responsibility for Becky and their need for her as the figure against which to define themselves, and they provide her with a place to live "on the narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road" (7). Becky is, thus, a meridian character, both symbolically and actually. She is caught in between the white and black worlds, accepted in neither. Likewise, she is situated between the past (represented by the road) and the future (represented by the railroad), and by being a liminal character, she essentially maintains the borders between black and white, past and future. Even her sons are locked in between two traditional worlds: "White or colored? No one knew, least of all themselves" (8). In the end, Becky is buried under the phallic chimney in her home when it collapses upon her as the train rolls by. Although the narrator and his companion imagine they hear a groan from beneath the rubble, they do not investigate. They merely toss a bible upon the heap and rush to town, where the citizens await the details of Becky's death. Through the townspeople's clandestine support of Becky and her sons, they have allowed racial blending while managing it through marginalization; publicly they ignore her, though they offer her furtive assistance. Although some scholars suggest

that the effects of progress have killed Becky since her house collapses due to the passing train, it may be equally surmised that social dictates have killed her; having heard Becky's groan, the narrator and his companion cannot investigate or save her life because the townspeople refuse to acknowledge their involvement with and support of her.

Similarly, the characters in "Blood-Burning Moon" are depicted as doomed to suffer because of strictures imposed upon them. Louisa, the black cook for a wealthy white family, is desired by both Tom Burwell, a black field laborer, and Bob Stone, the son of the family for whom she works. The men are both compelled to possess her, though she really desires Tom. Bob, for his part, finds her lovely "in her way. Nigger way. What was that? Damned if he knew." Additionally, he wonders if there were "something about niggers that you couldn't know" (33). Perhaps what Bob Stone finds puzzling is the connection implied throughout *Cane* of rural blacks and the past. In implying that blackness is more primitive and more closely associated with emotions than with conscious thought, the text also implies that blackness is the unconscious of whiteness and is, therefore, unknowable. The first section of the book presents scenes illustrating the free expression enabled in blacks by their proximity to folk culture, with its suggestions of authenticity, spirituality, and nobility. When they are removed from this source of authenticity (through a migration North, for example) or when they are inhibited (through social or religious dictates), they loose both their ability to express themselves and their seemingly inherent vibrancy. The latter is illustrated in "Blood-Burning Moon" when, on the night of a full moon, Tom and Bob fight for Louisa. Louisa and Tom cannot express their full attraction to each other because they are inhibited by Bob, who cannot accept her attraction to Tom and who feels he has a right to Louisa

since he is a white man. In fact, he laments the passing of the old days, when he could have gone in "as a master should and took her. Direct, honest, bold" (33). As a result, Bob is knifed to death and Tom is lynched, illustrating the tragedies resulting from social imperatives that restrict natural desires; the same imperatives restrict the expression of more complex identities than historically allowed.

Women in the text are depicted with the least ability to follow their own desires; they are depicted as bodies moving virtually unconsciously through life, being carried by custom and the courses of male desire. Those who do attempt to follow their own desires, such as Esther, are thwarted. In "Blood-Burning Moon," Louisa becomes a meridian figure, as she is desired by both black and white men who fight to the death to claim her. The deaths of both men suggest, of course, the tragedy that results from social shackles placed on natural desires, illustrating that it is not the desires themselves that are harmful but rather the denial and social control of them. Because Bob Stone's whiteness allows him to assume black and mixed raced women as his property, he cannot abide the thought of a black man with Louisa; because Tom's natural desires for Louisa must be subjugated to customs that allow white men access to her, he has no social rights to a relationship with her.

In the second section, women remain subject to social dictates, sometimes because they are removed from the South where, presumably, they would be closer to nature and to their own desires. Muriel in "Box Seat," for example, is unable to explore her attraction to Dan because the world of the urban North, represented by Mrs. Pribby, interferes with the expression of her emotions. In "Bona and Paul," the characters long to follow their desires for each other, but tradition and alienation from the natural self

interfere. Bona's emotions initially overcome her physically when she faints while playing basketball with Paul; subsequently, when it seems she and Paul will explore a relationship with one another, she disappears. Other women, such as Avey and the character in "Calling Jesus" are depicted as alienated from their own souls because they are removed from their heritage through displacement in the urban North. They are shown sleeping through life, living unconsciously, rather than embodying the vibrancy that the text suggests may result from connection to the heritage of black folk culture.

Like the women within the text who are forced to repress their emotions and desires rather than allow the spontaneous expression of them, the men in the text are similarly confined by social norms. *Cane* questions the meanings and limits of black male sexuality and demonstrates numerous failures and miscommunications that thwart these men's expression of their sexuality, desires, and emotions. In "Rhobert," for instance, the title character is depicted with a house upon his head. Weighed down by the pressures of domesticity and urban life, Rhobert "cares not two straws as to whether or not he will ever see his wife and children again. Many a time he's seen them drown in his dreams and has kicked about joyously in the mud for days after" (42). And in "Theatre," John is a man unable to fully integrate and enjoy his sexuality; his "body is separate from the thoughts that pack his mind [which is] contained above desires of his body" (52). In this section, women again are made to conform to social pressures as dancers are brought in line by strict choreography: "Soon the director will herd you, my full-lipped, distant beauties, and tame you, and blunt your sharp thrusts in loosely suggestive movements, appropriate to Broadway. . . . Soon the audience will paint your dusk faces white, and call you beautiful" (52). The women are animalized as they are herded into conformity, and

they are simultaneously removed from their natural selves through accommodation to public tastes.

The text reiterates, then, that removal from black heritage, including its connection to the earth, and forced conventions within the confines of urbanity result in the loss of self-expression and the ability to follow—even to recognize—one's own desires. Although *Cane* laments the potential loss of the black folk spirit and reviles the limitations imposed upon self-expression, it does, however, predict through its utopian longings the coming of a new messiah who will free Americans for expression of their true selves. This messiah, furthermore, will provide the model for the evolved American: a mixed raced meridian who unites the imagined riches of the past with the imagined resources of the future.

Transcending the Divide

Characters who represent this meridian figure of messiah are depicted throughout the text: King Barlo in "Esther," Dan in "Box Seat," and the old man in "Kabnis." Although Toomer wrote to Waldo Frank in late 1922 or early 1923 that "Kabnis is *Me*" (153), Kabnis is a weak and confused figure, a "promise of a soil-soaked beauty; uprooted, thinking out" who journeys south to connect with his heritage but who remains "Suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him" (98). In contrast, Lewis—another mixed raced character—is "what a stronger Kabnis might have been" (97) and it is he who "merges with his source and lets the pain and beauty of the South meet him there" (107). It is Lewis who understands the complexities of mixed race and Kabnis's weaknesses: "Cant hold them, can you?" he asks Kabnis. "Master; slave. Soil; and the overarching heavens. Dusk; dawn. They fight and bastardize you. The sun tint of

your cheeks, flame of the great season's multi-colored leaves, tarnished, burned. Split, shredded: easily burned. No use…" (109). Lewis rightly assesses that Kabnis cannot reconcile these dualities he contains and encounters, and because presumably Lewis has, he ultimately finds himself "completely cut out" of the interactions of his acquaintances: "Kabnis, Carrie, Stella, Halsey, Cora, the old man, the cellar, and the work-shop, the southern town descend upon him. Their pain is too intense" (112). Lewis, who has achieved connection between dualities, must abandon the possibility of connection with these individuals who as yet have not, reinforcing the sense of alienation and isolation that were modernist anxieties. The piece does not end in social utopia, but it does end with the suggestion of a new day when the past will be embraced in the present, allowing a hope for a brighter future and the coming of a new messiah.

Although Toomer draws a parallel between himself and Kabnis, he longs to be Lewis, imagining himself as a messiah, a vanguard in fostering a new understanding of race in America. He sought to encourage within Americans a transcendental vision of race and believed he was in the best position to offer such a transcendental vision. Robert B. Jones contends, "Toomer indeed conforms to R.W.B. Lewis's definition of the New American Adam: 'an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race" (134). However, Toomer was neither "bereft of ancestry" nor "untouched and undefiled" by associations with family and race. On the contrary, Toomer was largely influenced by both his grandfather and grandmother and his racial identity was the subject of much discussion—on his own part as well as the part of others. His self-definition as an American rested largely on a devaluation of traditional notions of race, and his supposed

repudiation of his black ancestry was the subject of continued scrutiny and comment. Toomer was notably concerned with the past, with ways in which to bring the past's treasures into the current era, as the text of *Cane* demonstrates. His New American metaphor, likewise, sought to bring the consciousness of diverse heritages into one grand cosmic consciousness, as evidenced by "The Blue Meridian." This unification of diverse elements, this ordering of perceived chaos, was a common project among many modernists. In terms of race, notions of social Darwinism and eugenics were popularized to address the disparate groups of people—some considered pre-modern—who needed to be incorporated into the modern nation. Both within the United States and in other countries, notably Mexico, this project was taken up in hopes that a utopian "cosmic race" might be realized.

José Vasconcelos, Mexican Minister of Education, was interested in the Indian who was assumed, like Southern black folk, to be dying in a "natural" and "modern" evolution of the races. In his 1925 book *La raza cosmica* (*The Cosmic Race*), Vasconcelos predicted the realization and expansion of an enlightened human consciousness through the integration of diverse groups. For Vasconcelos, the mestizo or racially mixed person was the present embodiment of the future ideal in which all races would meld into one. However, Vasconcelos predicted that more than simple biological mixture was necessary in order for the evolution of the "cosmic race" to occur; there was a spiritual element that he felt must be cultivated as well. The resultant race would be a people of heightened spirituality, intelligence, and artistic ability. As Vasconcelos wrote, "The central thesis of this book is that the various races of the earth tend to intermix at a gradually increasing pace, and eventually will give rise to a new human type, composed

of selections from each of the races already in existence" (3). Furthermore, Vasconcelos argued,"even the most contradictory racial mixtures can have beneficial results, as long as the spiritual factor contributes to raise them" (5). Thus he, like Toomer, acknowledged that the fusion of opposite types would result in a new ideal.[12] This new race, according to Vasconcelos, would be "the definitive race, the synthetical race, the integral race, made up of the genius and the blood of all peoples and, for that reason, more capable of true brotherhood and of a truly universal vision" (20). Vasconcelos's Cosmic Race and Toomer's New American, then, are imagined responses to anxieties regarding the loss of the past to the future and the loss of order to the present's chaos. Both men reified and idealized this new type.[13] Toomer's work, especially, demonstrates a need to reconcile seemingly dichotomous ideas and entities into a substantial whole, to find meridian sites where differences become complementary rather than oppositional. Certainly his own background and upbringing, as well as his personality—which would never allow him to settle into one area of interest and which caused him to retreat from any potential conflict—must have created in Toomer a longing for wholeness, both personally and socially.

Toomer's utopian American society is detailed in his poem "The Blue Meridian" (*Collected Poems)*, which he had been writing since before the publication of *Cane*. In this poem, Toomer writes of "a new America, to be spiritualized by each new American" (50), asserting, like Vasconcelos, that the ideal race will be one of heightened spirituality.

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[12] Obviously, both Vasconcelos and Toomer assume the existence of "races" as distinct and separate groups; Toomer and Vasconcelos argued that such races would eventually fuse to form a new and enlightened group, thereby erasing the divisions between the separate "races." For Vasconcelos, this process was "esthetic eugenics."

[13] "Reification refers to the process of regarding an idealized abstraction as if it were a concrete, objective thing with a material existence" (Jones 2), and "idealism is a classic response to reification, with its

Continuing this idea of the necessity of the spiritual, the poem asserts: "The old gods, led by an inverted Christ...Withdrew into the distance and died...We are waiting for a new God / For revelation in our day / For growth towards faceless Deity" (51). Here is repeated the notion, illustrated throughout *Cane*, that there will come a new messiah to foster self-knowledge and self-expression for the New Americans. This messiah, the poem argues, must be a "faceless" deity in order that all people be represented; the messiah must be an inclusive God for a new people who will grow "by admixture from less to more" (51). The New America, furthermore, will be a place where the "old peoples"—in this case Europeans, Africans, Native Americans, Christians, "all peoples of the earth"—meld into a new race (54). Thus, the poem predicts a literal "fusion of opposites" and a combination of "opposing forms and forces into a significant unity" facilitated through miscegenation.

The poem also speaks of the persona's own racialized body: "I stand where the two directions intersect / At Michigan Avenue and Walton Place / Level with my countrymen / Right-angled to the universe" (55). The speaker is, therefore, the point of convergence, the meridian between black and white, North and South, neither superior nor inferior to others. Additionally, the speaker's consideration of himself as "right-angled" to the universe suggests its meaning in terms of right and wrong, rather than solely in 90-degree angles. For he asserts later that

> There is a right turn,
> A struggle through purgatories of many names,
> A rising to one's real being
> Wherein one finds oneself linked with
> The real beings of other men, and in God;
> The Kingdom *exists*, and is to be *entered.* (61)

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promise that the alienated individual, socially fragmented and divided, can be made whole again in

Thus, the poem acknowledges the multiplicity of definitions for a person "of many names" and the limbo of identity these various definitions can foster. Yet, when one has made that "right turn" into one's real being, when one accepts the diversity within and acknowledges one's place in the human community, the poem suggests, he enters the kingdom—that utopia of understanding, self-acceptance, and communion with others. It is then that the individual accomplishes the true goal for which the speaker longs:

> Unlock the races, Open this pod by outgrowing it,
> Free men from this prison and this shrinkage,
> Not from reality itself
> But from our prejudices and preferences
> And the enslaving behavior caused by them,
> Eliminate these—
> I am, we are, simply of the human race.
>
> Uncase the nations
> Open this pod by outgrowing it,
> Keep the real but destroy the false;
> We are the human nation.
>
> Uncase the regions—
> Occidental, Oriental, North, South—
> We are of Earth.
>
> Free the sexes
> From the penalties and proscriptions
> That allegedly are laid on us
> Because we are male and female . . .
>
> Expand the fields, the specializations,
> The limitations of occupation,
> The definitions of what we are
> That gain fractions and lose wholes—
> I am of the field of being,
> We are beings. (64)

The poem, then, calls for the eradication, not of difference, but of hierarchies that seek to prioritize one type of difference above all others. It is these hierarchies that, according to

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thought" (Jones 3).

the poem, are enslaving, and, as a result, the poem insists on the acknowledgment and acceptance of the universal family of humanity. It insists, likewise, on being free of labels imposed by occupation, on being free of the restrictions imposed by gender roles. "The Blue Meridian," like *Cane*, encourages an understanding of the self as meridian figure—a human being uniting various parts (as opposed to simply male or female, black or white)—and encourages the free expression of that being in the world.

Points of Contact

Cane asserts that such free expression of the self results from connection to one's heritage; thus, it depicts the South as a place of rootedness, of connection with the organic, natural world. Yet it is also a place that resists control, a place filled with actual and potential violence—as "Blood-Burning Moon" and "Kabnis" show. Rural areas, then, are depicted with their threat to black lives. The city, too, as the location where energies and desires are contained, is likewise illustrated as a dangerous place for blacks. Not only does the city make self-expression difficult if not impossible because of its disconnection from the natural world, it is also a place where blacks are more likely to exploit other blacks. Additionally, it is the place where blacks may internalize the white values that stifle their natural selves, as the story "Rhobert" depicts.

Cane illustrates the trials of modernization and the repressive hold of ideologies of race and gender and remains ambivalent about the possibility of achieving harmony through racial mixture when such mixture is surrounded by anxieties and tragedies resulting from limiting social demands. *Cane* suggests the struggles and tragic fates of individuals both dark and light, although it suggests the hope of a brighter day when the future generation, symbolized by Carrie in "Kabnis," may acknowledge and embrace its

history, symbolized by the old black man whom she holds at the end of the story. It does not offer the utopian ideal of "The Blue Meridian, " which is, after all, just that—utopian, removed from lived experience in the world in which people actually reside. The poem's vision is a transcendental one that seeks to lift people into the realm of the soul, away from their bodies and experiences, thus offering thoughts on how race might be envisioned on a more theoretical level; as such, it elides the slippery circumstances met by people who necessarily must interact through their troublesome bodies. Of course, this is the nature of utopian thought; it relies on non-utopian realities to contrast with its ideas of perfection.

Ultimately, then, the texts' solutions to dealing with "primitive" bodies in a modernizing world are different. In *Cane*, the solution suggested is one to be realized in the future when the modern individual will have rescued those beneficent elements of the dying past, allowing intellectual progress and enlightenment along with a connection to the folk characteristics garnered through bodily experience: connection to sexuality, sensuality, emotions, and an assumed wholeness derived from remaining pre-modern and, hence, unfragmented. The solution offered in "The Blue Meridian" is to lift humans above those bodies in hopes that they may relate on the level of the soul—in Toomer's later estimation, the true location of identity. Both texts, however, also offer the more material suggestion that the points of contact, the sites of juxtaposition, offer hope for alternative views of race and difference; they suggest that these sites, such as "Seventh Street" and the bodies and minds of the New Americans, may provide the location for working through hierarchy and opposition in order to foster sites of greater harmony. In the material realm, it may be only on the border between seemingly opposite worlds or in

the point of transition between seemingly opposite identities where the texts offer hope for social progress.

Toomer's New American is a meridian metaphor of identity that attempts to resist fixation into one racial category.[14] Nevertheless, it is also an identity that attempts to leave behind bodies and actual histories in an effort to understand individuals in terms of the soul and the future while at the same time maintaining a connection to an idealized image of the past. On the theoretical level, such an identity could foster social change by allowing new space within language for self-definition; in other words, new meridian metaphors may be suggested to facilitate broader understandings of identity, understandings that resist the hierarchy and opposition of traditional notions of race. Toomer's texts begin to offer an alternative way of discussing race and racial difference, to implement a new language of meridian metaphors that would allow a unified whole to be created from distinct parts. The texts demonstrate the search for a language to express the understanding that society itself is made of individuals who are all composites of diverse origins and who must relate to each other beyond the boundaries of their bodies.

If the human role in modernism was truly, as Cecelia Tichi suggests, to "formulate new designs" (xii), then Toomer was performing his role when he imagined the New American, a new design for understanding humanity beyond categories of race and gender. His texts attempt to fight the sense of alienation that was rampant during the newly industrializing time in which they were written as well as that alienation their author may have felt by being "neither black nor white." Toomer once asked, "Is it . . . that I am to interpret the white to the black, the black to the white? Or is it that I am to

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[14] Of course, despite his pronounced dislike of all categories, Toomer's New American is a category that does not avoid the oppositions resulting from nationalism.

decrystallize these divisions and make possible the widespread consciousness of the American race?" [15] "The Blue Meridian" and *Cane* aim, through their meridian metaphors, to decrystallize traditional divisions and facilitate an understanding of a universal—and utopian—whole. Within them, one reads Toomer's call for the New American man and woman, who might symbolize a transcendence of traditionally divisive categories, who might carry the past within modernity, and who might stand as meridians on the map of the nation. This meridian metaphor, then, suggested a use of language not to isolate and divide but to unite disparate parts into a new whole.

Toomer's meridian metaphor offers a point of contact and departure for my study of later twentieth century metaphors of mixed race that seek sites of fusion where difference can be viewed beyond hierarchy and opposition. In Toomer's work are the seeds of an effort to imagine the mixed race individual outside of the limits imposed by dominant ideas of blackness and whiteness. I am reading his mixed race ideologies and meridian metaphors as precursors of the work of later writers—such as Fran Ross, Danzy Senna, and Jenoyne Adams—who take up the discourse of mixed race in order to assert new understandings of race and racial mixture. These writers' metaphors continue Toomer's efforts to decrystallize historical lines of division as they attempt to de-solidify reified notions of race and gender difference. In this effort, these later authors offer metaphors that, like Toomer's meridian metaphor, continue to articulate longings for utopian sites of harmony where mixed raced identities may find sites of belonging; however, they also demonstrate that such sites for mixed race are limited by the traditional language of human understanding and interaction, thereby problematizing

[15] From a 1930 diary entry.

utopian aims for harmony and wholeness. Nevertheless, these later metaphors, such as the metaphor of traveler and quester in Fran Ross's *Oreo*, continue to play with concepts of race and difference in order to pinpoint new sites for locating mixed race on the map of identity.

CHAPTER 4
TRAVELING THROUGH FRAN ROSS'S *OREO*, NO ORDINARY COOKIE

The Frontier: Where Two Come Together

Traveling to my grandmother's funeral when I was married, my white husband and I walked down the narrow plane aisle toward our seats. In front of me was a black woman who stopped the line when she reached her row and asked the white man in the aisle seat to excuse her as she shuffled into the window seat. As she settled herself, the man looked at me and asked, "Are you two together?" I said no and proceeded past him and his bewildered look.

My husband scoffed, loudly enough for the man to hear, "That was an interesting assumption, huh?"

"Yeah," I replied. "But you know that happens to me all the time."

And, indeed, it does. People readily assume I "belong" with any other people of color in the vicinity, and rarely, if ever, did they assume I "belonged" with my husband. Reflecting on the incident now, I wonder how effective I could have been in articulating my sense of place if I'd answered the man's question affirmatively, though unexpectedly: "Yes, I *am* two together."

Because I can see myself as both black and white, I, like many others whose parents are of different races, may think of myself as moving in the space that unites the two, as traveling from one shore to another given certain contexts, or as sailing the river that forms the meridian between two shores. Such metaphors of movement, travel, and

cruising are not uncommon in explorations of mixed race identity; in fact, the metaphor of border crosser has been taken up readily and used to suggest a mobility and indeterminacy that may not be as easily accessible as the metaphor suggests. Mixed race identity often has been considered a "frontier" in race relations, continuing the travel metaphor and extending it into the realm of quest.[1] Thus, the anecdote with which I began this chapter becomes a fitting example of the role of movement, travel, and quest in explorations and definitions of mixed race identity. Alternatively, the anecdote may invoke Denise Riley's suggestion that the various components of identity are made to foreground and recede in differing situations. This notion may be more useful in interrogating the workings of identity than that of the border crosser. We may imagine individuals traveling with identities whose components are variously enacted or shelved without imagining that these individuals are completely liberated from the constraints of identity, as if their ability to cross borders were a ticket into every desirable community and a ticket out of every undesirable situation.

These introductory comments regarding travel and quest are important to the following discussion of *Oreo*, the recently republished novel by Fran Ross. This novel, like the others under discussion here, explores the play within mixed race identity as it attempts to assert a utopian sense of racial harmony and wholeness and to grapple with the theoretical and philosophical questions of mixed race and gender. Its metaphors—of traveler and quester—remain consistent with discourses of mixed race that theorize such individuals in terms of the past—as outcasts who seek an acknowledgement and understanding of their origins—and in terms of the future—as pioneers whose existence

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[1] Consider Maria P.P. Root's 1996 anthology *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier.*

may foster the racial harmony of utopian visions. In keeping with other discourses of mixed race identity, the novel prioritizes questions of history and origins as well as future possibilities for imagining race. Within *Oreo*, the personal utopia sought also connects to the longing for a national utopia that would rectify the racial discord of the period in which it was written—during the Black Nationalist Movement of the 1970's. Originally published in 1974, Ross's novel was not well received since it both literally and figuratively plays with the ideologies of race and gender that were being debated at the time. In a January 1975 review, the novel is described as "experimental, intelligent, and even funny in places. The dialogue, however, is a strange mixture of Uncle Remus and Lenny Bruce, and quite often unintelligible" (Salassi 146). This initial review offers a striking contrast to one following the novel's reprinting in 2000, when it is heralded as "a true twenty-first century novel. Its wit is global, hybrid and uproarious; its meditation on language is simultaneously irreverent, appropriative and serious" (Foreman and Stein-Evers 36). The latter review, however, problematically asserts "the goodness of ambiguity which leads everywhere: the triumphant chameleon goes unnoticed wherever it chooses," displaying precisely the dangerous assumption inherent in notions of the border crosser as they are often articulated. *Oreo* by no means suggests that the dualities of identity make it possible for one to escape the realities and constraints of racism, sexism, and oppression. Rather, the novel suggests that dualities allow one to *play* (both literally and figuratively) with the structures of identity, allow one to manipulate boundaries and seek agency in arenas where these might seem rigid and inaccessible, respectively.

Oreo is a rewriting of the mythical story of Theseus, and it casts the black/Jewish mixed race heroine as the metaphorical traveler, the individual on the quest for self as she

searches for the secret of her birth by trying to find her father. Additionally, the title character manipulates the boundaries of gender in interesting ways; in fact, Oreo moves beyond limited notions of the feminine in her ability to travel, cross borders, and manipulate boundaries. She, unlike traditional notions of the feminine, is completely active and never passive; she is mobile rather than static, multiple rather than singular. I take care, however, not to read Oreo as the typical border crosser, given the problematic nature of that metaphor. Although Gloria Anzaldúa's theories of mixed race identity as a borderland shed light on Ross's novel, Oreo—as traveler, translator, and mediator—moves beyond prevalent uses of the border crosser. Indeed, rather than existing on the borderlands, in some indeterminate limbo, Oreo constantly embodies movement and change and, like a mythological hero, actively participates in a quest for her origins and, by extension, a quest for herself; unlike Theseus, however, Oreo explores more fully the frontiers of her own identity in terms of racial and gender mixtures.

Additionally, the novel invokes and questions other American ideologies such as myths of pioneers and the frontier, which has long been understood as the meeting point or dividing line between disparate, and often oppositional, entities: civilization and wilderness, socialized and savage, known and unknown. This dichotomous thinking is clearly problematic in discussions of race and gender, as my analysis of nineteenth century metaphors of race attests. If race is constructed as oppositional and hierarchical, what might it mean to live on the border of race or, conversely, to embody that border? Again, the limitations of the border crosser metaphor are made clear when we imagine an individual adept at crossing boundaries while at the same time we imagine her as representative of those boundaries; in this way, movement and ontology struggle in

counter-productive ways. A more useful question may be: What might it mean to travel into and between the realms that the racial and gender borders both divide and unite, to foreground and recede characteristics of identity traditionally associated with opposing sides of those borders? Ross's *Oreo* allows an exploration of this question through its questing protagonist.

As much literary scholarship has noted, the quest motif is prevalent within American literary history.[2] The utopian language that this motif employs has been adopted by many within the context of mixed race identity discourse. As suggested by the title of Joel Williamson's text—*New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*—many consider mixed race individuals to be "new people," though the reality of race mixing is hardly novel. During historical periods of racial crisis and turmoil, mixed race people have been hailed as the solution to divisive race relations; as mentioned in the previous discussion on Jean Toomer, in 1925, the Mexican Minister of Education, José Vasconcelos, called those of mixed parentage the "Cosmic Race" and asserted that this would be the "definitive race, the synthetical race, the integral race, made up of the genius and the blood of all peoples and, for that reason, more capable of true brotherhood and of a truly universal vision" (20), provided the "spiritual factor" was present to "direct and consummate this extraordinary enterprise" (26). Of course, Vasconcelos's notion of the cosmic race was founded on eugenicist thought that hoped to rid the nation of the supposed primitive and inferior native through reproduction with the presumed modern

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[2] According to Kristina Groover, "The notion of spiritual quest as a quintessential American experience is central to both American mythology and literature....Early Puritan texts depict the English colonists' literal sojourn in the New England wilderness as a spiritual descent into the wilderness of the soul..." (1). Elaborating upon this idea, Groover turns to the work of R.W.B. Lewis, who wrote that "The 'authentic American'...derives from the Biblical Adam, 'a figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised at the start of a new history'" (3).

and superior European; in this way, reproduction becomes tied to racial and cultural genocide, as Vasconcelos hoped racial mixture would lead to the eradication of indigenous populations. Though Vasconcelos wrote his treatise almost a century ago, rhetoric reminiscent of his and even earlier utopian visions is still apparent in contemporary discussions of mixed race identity. Thus it is that mixed race individuals, a heterogeneous group, become Williamson's new people and the pioneers of Root's racial frontier.

The quest motif—whether imagined on a personal or a national level—embodies utopian longings. And in each case, the relationship between the national and the personal as well as the personal and the historical is one that, though elided, cannot be eradicated.[3] Of course, the idea that people can exist without history is precisely what is implied by misnomers such as Williamson's "new people." Despite the fact that they are said to be forging a new race, mixed race individuals can be viewed as doing so only by laying claim to a certain history, one that traditionally has been denied them. As Naomi Zack asserts, "Since mixed race does not exist in a biracial system, individuals who are of mixed race, or who would be if black and white racial categories had rational foundations, have an interesting identity problem: Either they can create identities of mixed race for themselves, in opposition to the biracial system, or, they can eschew all

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[3] As Nina Baym contends, quest motifs enforce a common myth about the individual's relationship to society:

> The myth narrates a confrontation of the American individual, the pure American self divorced from specific social circumstances, with the promise offered by the idea of America. The promise is the deeply romantic one that in this new land, untrammeled by history and social accident, a person will be able to achieve complete self-definition. Behind this promise is the assurance that individuals come before society, that they exist in some meaningful sense prior to, and apart from, societies in which they happen to find themselves. The myth also holds that, as something artificial and secondary to human nature, society exerts an unmitigatedly destructive pressure on individuality. (quoted in Groover 3)

racial identities" (6). A third option, one that has been advocated historically, has been that of hypodescent—whereby individuals identify with the minority side of their ancestry. The final option, which has been problematized by reifications of hypodescent, has been "passing" into the majority race, an option available only to those of mixed race with phenotypes resembling the majority's.[4] Mixed race individuals can find identity as *mixed race* only by acknowledging their ancestry completely; they can claim multiraciality only by claiming the races of both parents, of all ancestors—majority and minority alike—rather than relying on traditional notions of hypodescent that specify persons of mixed ancestry must be classified as members of the minority group.

Traveling Beyond the Boundaries

Ross's text challenges traditional notions of race and gender, questioning the significance of individual histories on collective understandings of race and gender and offering a vision that allows play within identity. Additionally, within its present moment of racial conflict, it searches the past in order to offer possibilities for racial harmony. *Oreo* confronts the meaning of origins in terms of identity since notions of history and ancestry are complicated in discussions of mixed race, with traditional definitions of race requiring individuals to deny portions of their ancestry.[5] The idea that one might sidestep these complexities and define oneself apart from one's family, history, and society is

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[4] Suzanne Bost argues, "Only a few African-Americans who successfully manipulated, subverted, or masked racial identity succeeded in overcoming those (in)visible [racial] barriers" (35), suggesting that those who pass are really blacks in disguise, rather than whites or something between the two poles.

[5] As Zack has remarked, "the American problem of mixed race creates crises of personal identity if personal identity must be based on individual family histories." Elaborating on this matter, Zack writes:

> If designated black Americans are not racially pure...then individual attempts to identify the self on a foundation of family history, where the individual identifies with black forebears, will be seriously frustrated by the presence of oppressive white forebears. Designated black Americans who are racially mixed and who identify with their white ancestors will face a different problem of accepting as part of their identity black ancestors who have been devalued by white ancestors. (65)

intrinsic not only to notions of hypodescent but also to the American quest motif, which privileges individualism and self-sufficiency.[6] Obviously, such notions of self-definition are problematized by race and feminist theories that challenge the prototypical American quest motif and assert the importance of personal history and community to individual identity, racial and otherwise. As feminist inquiries have shown, women-centered searches for identity often take into account the individual's history and origins. *Oreo* remains in keeping with this tradition, even though its model is not representative of a feminist literary canon.

In *Oreo*, Ross rewrites the Greek myth of Theseus, who, longing to know the secret of his birth, embarks on a quest to find his father, a journey that challenges Theseus mentally and physically and takes him into the Minotaur's labyrinth. Additionally, it is a journey that involves Theseus's betrayal of a woman, his lover and guide Ariadne, necessitating a questioning of Ross's use of this white patriarchal model for her story of racial and gender resistance. Yet, according to Suzanne Bost,

> Many cultures have worked out their racial anxiety through a legendary woman. Often, like Pocahontas or La Malinche, this woman is positioned between cultures, translating between the colonized and the colonizer, mediating the process of colonization. Both Pocahontas and la Malinche became lovers with one of the conquering men and have thus assumed symbolic responsibility for fusing the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized. They represent both sides of the colonial conflict and the crossings between sides. The women's bodies are targeted as the source of new mixed races. (59)

In the case of *Oreo*, however, the legendary woman is also a virgin; she becomes not the source of new mixed races but the source of new possibilities for imagining mixed

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[6] "This image of the mature, fully developed person as one who has successfully separated and differentiated from others recalls [R.W. B.] Lewis's description of the mythic American Adam, 'untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling'" (Groover 4).

race—and, consequently, race in general—during a time of heightened racial anxiety and opposition.

Ross's use of a mixed race character during this time of racial struggle and interracial turmoil and anxiety is not surprising since historical analysis demonstrates that, during moments of racial crisis, discourses of mixed race emerge within the national consciousness. During those historical moments when racial tensions and anxieties are most severe, mixed race becomes centralized in public forums. For example, after the slave trade was abolished in the United States, the racial identity and social status of mulattos became increasingly important. During the antebellum period, the tragic mulatto motif became more widespread in North American literary narratives as an emblem of the evils of slavery. Similarly, during Reconstruction and the period of Jim Crow, mulatto characters emerged as literary representatives of W.E.B. Du Bois's Talented Tenth, whose call it was to lead the African-American masses out of oppression. Mixed raced individuals and characters become increasingly visible in moments of racial crisis, perhaps because the "notion of 'pure blood' always rests on the possibility and the reality of 'mixed blood' (Sollors, *Neither* 4).

Ross's use of a mixed raced character is in keeping with this tradition of the heightened visibility of mixed race in times of racial conflict. Interestingly, Ross uses a character who is representative of the inclusiveness of Civil Rights struggle[7] at a time when the achievements of that struggle were being criticized as too few and too limited. Neither Ross's historical context nor her textual setting is the Civil Rights era; instead, Ross uses a protagonist who embodies Civil Rights ideologies of integration in an

[7] Jewish participation in the Civil Rights Movement is widely documented. Indeed, as Katya Gibel Azoulay and others have noted, many similarities exist between African-American and Jewish struggles, allowing the possibility of solidarity in political movements.

historical and textual setting of Black Nationalism and separatism. Additionally, she models her heroine's quest after one from the canon of white, patriarchal western civilization.

According to Harryette Mullen,

> Oreo's tongue-in-cheek mimicry of the Greek hero underscores Ross's cheekiness as an African American woman who takes on the Western literary tradition...Like other black women writers who emerged in the same decade, Ross creates a feminist heroine whose strength is tested through conflict with male antagonists, sexual predators as well as negligent or oppressive father figures. . . . [Oreo] is aware that she has entered an urban space controlled by aggressive males, just as Ross and other feminist writers of the 1970s entered a literary arena in which women's writing was devalued. ("Apple Pie" 112)

Although Ross re-centralizes white patriarchal models of literature and the quest for identity and self-knowledge, she simultaneously subverts this model through both content and form, altering the typical white male quest to suit specific feminist purposes and racial uplift. Her use of humor and her variations of genre, too, represent distancing from the white patriarchal norm, signaling the limitless possibilities for artistic, racial, and gender expression while remaining inclusive of a literary ancestry that has been privileged. In this way, Ross's own writing mimics her character's mastery of and subsequent moves beyond the limitations of pre-existing texts.[8] Thus, Ross's text plays not only with notions of racial and gender identity and with the meanings of wholeness for mixed raced individuals but also plays with language, genre, the quest motif, and even literary history.

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[8] As Oreo's final school assignment, she rewrites a "standard treatise" in her own words, paying attention to only the sound—and not the sense—of her diction. "Thus a typical sentence in *Fallow*: 'Wheat farm B showed a declining profit-loss ratio during the harvest season,' became in Oreo's manuscript: 'Oat ranch wasp played the drooping excess-death proportion while a crop pepper'" (84).

Ross's retelling is, in the words of Mullen, "a linguistically riotous feminist tall tale of a young black woman's journey from Philadelphia to New York in search of her Jewish father" (Foreward xix). Neither the Greek myth of Theseus nor the journey of Oreo uphold the traditional American quest motif of a lone, male individual wandering into the wilderness in search of himself through solitude. Rather, both the myth of Theseus and Oreo's story revolve around the protagonist journeying into the unknown, encountering others instead of solitude, in order to find answers about themselves by finding their fathers. These quests, then, are rooted in community and ancestry, rather than solitude and a forward marching trail toward a new self that ignores that self's origins.[9] In both cases, identity cannot be divorced from history; rather, one's ancestry and origins are crucial to an understanding of the self.

Like Theseus, Oreo begins her quest when her mother notices that she is ready: emotionally mature, intellectually adept, and physically capable. At this point, Oreo's mother, Helen, gives Oreo a list of clues left by her father, Samuel,[10] and tells Oreo that if she is capable of lifting a boulder under which her father has left a sword and sandals, she is indeed ready to find her father and learn the secret of her birth. Unlike the tale of Theseus, however, the bolder in *Oreo* is really a huge mound of silly-putty collected by Oreo's brother Jimmie C. Once this obstacle is removed, Oreo discovers nothing beneath it. Instead, absent-minded Helen takes Oreo inside to a loose floorboard where the

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[9] Theseus, however, does spend twenty years on his quest—years that make him absent from his wife and the son he's never seen. It can be said, then, that Theseus does ignore community even though his quest is one to seek out ancestry.

[10] In keeping with the novel's subversions of logic, the list of clues Oreo's father leaves, which supposedly mimic Theseus's journey, actually predict the experiences of Oreo's journey in search of her father—events that Samuel could not have known beforehand. In many instances, the novel calls on readers to suspend their disbelief; however, these instances often read less like flaws than they do as examples of Ross's literary playfulness and challenge of conventions.

heroine is disappointed to find "a mezuzah on a thin chain and a pair of bed socks. 'This he calls sword and sandals?'" (80) Oreo asks.

Thus begins Oreo's "journey" or, to quote the title of the section in which this journey begins, her "meandering." Her journey allows her encounters with a pickpocket with a fake limp on the subway, a family of dwarves who speak only in rhymed couplets and who sell dog treats in Central Park, a young actor who speaks English in the syntax of other languages. Oreo's absurd encounters offer entertaining revisions to the Greek myth, but they also become part of a playful yet important critique of race, gender, and even language use. According to Mullen, "If Theseus' entry into the Labyrinth suggests the masculine hero's return to the womb followed by the rebirth of a new self through the feminine power of his guide, Ariadne, Oreo's quest to meet her deadbeat dad suggests a feminist daughter's claim to self-knowledge as well as her determination to challenge patriarchy and to contest the phallic power of the male" (Foreword xxi).[11]

Clearly, the novel presents biting critiques of both the dominant (white) and the alternative (Afrocentric) ideologies of its time. It presents a character who both upholds and denounces Black Nationalist ideologies; Oreo is smart, capable, and proud of her heritage(s), yet she is also smart and capable in ways that demonstrate her independence from men in an era when women most often were relegated to the background of the movement for racial uplift. The text, additionally, returns to the familiar motif in texts of mixed race as its female protagonist searches for her identity through her father. Although Oreo's mother and grandmother have been influential in shaping her identity,

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[11] The novel's prominent gender and racial critiques make it a radical statement during the era in which it was written; as Mullen also notes, the novel's "title, plot, subject matter, and irreverent satire must have been at odds with the cultural nationalism of other works published by black writers in the 1970s, not to mention the works of established Jewish authors such as Saul Bellow" (*Not* par. 9).

she still perceives a lack without knowledge of her father; it is he who holds the "secret of her birth," although Oreo's mother could not be unaware of this secret, having herself been present at Oreo's conception. Regardless of Helen's awareness, Oreo must seek this knowledge through her father; unlike the other texts being analyzed here, however, the absent father in *Oreo* is white instead of black. *Oreo* does not problematize the history and present dilemmas of black patriarchy; rather, it acknowledges a history in which mixed race individuals were conceived through the sexual liaisons of white men and black women. In this case, it is important to note, the liaison is not due to the rape of a black slave woman by a white master—historically the most common occurrence; instead, Oreo's parents are depicted as a couple united in marriage at a time just subsequent to the legalization of miscegenation and during the initial years of the Black Nationalist Movement, when relationships between black women and white men were strongly denounced.[12] The text resists the separatism that was often a prominent part of Black Nationalist thought, encouraging in many ways an integrationist view more in keeping with the Civil Rights movement than with Black Power. At the same time, however, the text exhibits a tension regarding the potential for success in interracial romance, as Samuel and Helen's marriage ultimately fails and Samuel subsequently marries a white woman. Of course, the text also acknowledges that Samuel is financially pressured by his father to abandon his initial marriage, suggesting that it is social pressures that may spell the downfall of interracial romance.

The text resists easy categorization, reflecting in form what it also demonstrates in content: a questioning of the codes typically used to construct one's own or pinpoint

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[12] In 1967, the Supreme Court decided in *Loving v. Virginia* that anti-miscegenation laws are unconstitutional.

another's identity. In the same way that *Oreo* questions ethnic, racial, and gender identity within its content, it also necessitates a questioning of its representation of the Black Power, Civil Rights, and Feminist movements. Simultaneously, it forces questions regarding what makes a text a *representative* of each of these movements. *Oreo* both resists and is implicated by the various ideologies circulating during the time it was written, demonstrating that we may not judge even a book by its cover.

Thus, Ross's novel diverges from the Black Nationalist ideology prominent in the 1970s, when many of the movement's members had grown weary of the techniques used by Civil Rights activists in the 1960s to free African-Americans from racial oppression. As William Van Deburg has noted, Black Nationalists were a diverse group favoring a variety of often competing strategies for achieving African-American autonomy. Van Deburg highlights two fundamental ideologies of the Black Power Movement: pluralism and nationalism, both of which were essentially separatist in their stance toward African-American and Caucasian interactions (120). Disillusionment with the integrationist tendencies of the Civil Rights Movement caused many Black Nationalists to assert the necessity of black separatism in struggles for racial autonomy.

Ross's use of a black/Jewish female protagonist, then, is significant during this time of heightened Afrocentrism and separatist ideology. This choice is yet another that is reminiscent of the more integrationist Civil Rights movement, when African- and Jewish-Americans struggled together against racial oppression. By the time *Oreo* was written, the aims of Black Nationalism had fractured the solidarity among many blacks and Jews. Thus, Ross's depiction of Oreo as an individual of mixed black/Jewish heritage is challenging to assumptions regarding relations between the two communities. Katya

Gibel Azoulay asserts that in the 1960s "Jews and Blacks shared similar concerns when it came to the politics of group identity and attitudes toward its reproduction" (61). These similarities include ambivalence about assimilation, politically motivated social movements, and an existence that includes being "othered" by the dominant group. Yet, partially because there is debate over whether Jews should be considered as "whites," tension emerged between blacks and Jews.

Ross, in fact, points explicitly to the post-Civil Rights lack of empathy and solidarity among many blacks and Jews. Oreo's black grandfather, James, earned his living conning Jewish customers out of their money with items catering to their religious practice. When he learned of his daughter's intention to marry a Jewish man, "he managed to croak one anti-Semitic 'Goldberg!' before he turned to stone, as it were, in his straight-backed chair, his body a rigid half swastika" (3). Similarly, when Oreo's Jewish grandmother learned her son would marry a black woman and that he was dropping out of school, she "dropped dead of a racist/my-son-the-bum coronary" (3). Because of this tension among black and Jewish communities, questions of race for individuals of mixed black and Jewish heritage are complicated. Ross's choice to create her protagonist as the daughter of an African-American woman and a Jewish man, then, is significant and offers opportunities to question the meanings and experience of blackness, Jewishness, and black/Jewish mixture as well as the ideological underpinnings of the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements, when the one-drop rule still prevailed to determine identity in those of mixed race heritage. Accordingly, Oreo may be viewed by many as a black girl whose father happens to be Jewish, though Jewishness for Samuel Schwartz is merely a nod to his culture of origin and a religion he does not

practice. However, Ross clearly questions such easy identifications by making Oreo well versed in both African-American and Jewish-American cultures, cuisines, and languages. Through Oreo's satirical performances of blackness and Jewishness, Ross seems to uphold the notion of race as social construction, yet at the same time, she allows Oreo access to Jewishness merely through paternity—which does not make Oreo Jewish at all since that lineage is passed through the mother. Additionally, the father through whom Oreo makes this claim does not perform Jewishness himself, suggesting that, again through racial performance, Oreo may be more Jewish than he.

"She Got Womb"

In her choice of a black/Jewish protagonist, Ross confounds normalized racial boundaries and plays with the meanings of racial identity and identification. Through her choice of a distinctly unconventional *female* protagonist, Ross similarly plays with the boundaries of gender, creating a young woman who challenges stereotypes of female intellectual, physical, and emotional potential. By the age of three, Oreo demonstrates her linguistic expertise by writing backwards a note to her mother, who has for years sent elementary letters to her children during her business travels. Held in front of a mirror, Oreo's letter would read: "dear mom cut the crap" (24). Additionally, Oreo is mathematically brilliant, entertaining herself with complex calculations and speculations on "how many people in, say, Denver, Colorado, were at that very moment making love" (91). Finally, eleven-year-old Oreo is physically unconquerable and emotionally unflappable, having developed a self-defense system she calls WIT (Way of the Interstitial Thrust), "based on an Oriental dedication to attacking the body's soft, vulnerable spaces, or *au fond*, to making such spaces, or interstices, where previously

none had existed." Thus, "whether he was big or small, fat or thin, well-built or spavined, Oreo could, when she was in a state of extreme concentration known as *hwip-as*, engage any opponent up to three times her size and weight and whip his natural ass" (55).

Given her superior mental and physical abilities and her parallels with the Greek hero Theseus, Oreo clearly disrupts traditional gender roles. At a time when black women were expected to work behind the scenes in nationalist groups dedicated to racial uplift, Ross presents a young minority woman who will not be silent. Moreover, writing in the era when Stokley Carmichael suggested that the best position for women in the movement was prone, Ross dares to offer a female character who is deliberately and defiantly active. Constantly in movement and in celebration of her body, Oreo takes pleasure in herself and for herself. Consciously choosing to remain a virgin, Oreo nonetheless toys with men who mistake her for an easy sexual target, turning the tables on them in ways that reveal their ignorance and subject them to sexual manipulation. For example, when Oreo receives an obscene phone call, she does not allow herself to be victimized. Instead, she subtly controls the conversation, tricking the caller into a situation where he becomes the victim of the neighborhood nymphomaniac.

This scene, although demonstrative of Oreo's reversal of sexual oppression, represents a significant flaw in this novel of female empowerment and subversion of patriarchal culture. In fact, this scene and another in which Oreo must pretend to be a prostitute reveal important tensions in the text's feminist narrative, which falters when confronted with the reality of female sexual desire and prostitution. The novel characterizes Betty, the woman who helps Oreo trick the obscene caller, with malice and contempt. She is depicted as a woman so sex-crazed that she feels slighted when she

cannot fulfill her desires with the obscene caller. In fact, it is clear from her characterization that Betty shares none of Oreo's indignation with the man's attempt to molest women over the phone and in person; additionally, she is characterized singularly in terms of her body and her physical desires, a mindless entity, the "Half WIT" of the section's title. After Oreo punishes the caller and elicits his promise to cease his molestations of "innocent young women," Betty asks, " But what about me?" Oreo's response is scathing and at odds with her previous championing of women: "Your father will be home any minute now. Do what you usually do in these circumstances. Fuck *him*" (61).

Oreo treats other women, prostitutes specifically, with similar disdain. In each of these instances, the text's feminist narrative appears to slip, not allowing its protagonist to enact its feminist ideologies in support of women who are depicted as highly sexual beings or as women who choose or are forced to choose a life of prostitution. The text explicitly questions the loyalties of these women when Oreo wonders "how many of these women would fight for Parnell [their pimp] once she made her move and started pushing and shoving him all over this room? Would she have to rack them all up?" (155). The text is uncertain where to position itself in regard to prostitutes and women who flaunt their sexuality, women it sees as upholding patriarchal culture whether through choice or unfortunate circumstance; interestingly, this text that makes a mockery of boundaries and challenges conventions is uneasy with these women whom it cannot definitively place within the matrix of patriarchy. In fact, the repeated reference to Oreo's virginity suggests the text's elevation of women who are untainted by sexual contact with men; Oreo's extraordinary nature may correlate with her sexual state—she may be a

virgin because she is an exceptional young woman or she may be an exceptional young woman because she is a virgin.

Despite this tension between the text's feminist discourse and its depictions of female sexuality, the protagonist is positioned decidedly as a strong woman. As Oreo's uncle attests, "She sure got womb, that little mother…I wouldn't want to mess with her when she gets older. She is a ball buster and a *half*." (53) Ross's reversal of the masculine-centered testament to power depicts *female* power as something not to be taken lightly. In many ways, then, Ross demonstrates women's power and self-determination in an age when women were seen as bodies in service to the movement. At the same time, however, it sexualizes certain women as mere bodies, continuing the struggle over women's bodies and their autonomy. During the movement, as before it, black women's bodies were highly subject to regulation since the "building of the black nation within a diaspora context has always been seen to be contingent on the maintenance of a biologically determined and genetically maintained racial purity, inscribing the individual black body with the investments of a nation" (Ongiri 233). Given such nationalist ideology, Ross's Oreo is a revolutionary figure—a young, independent, intelligent, active and capable woman. Yet, as previously mentioned, the fact that Oreo's sense of identity and origin relies on her father is testament to the iron grip of patriarchy on definitions of self; common among texts dealing with mixed race is this privileging of the father in negotiations of a daughter's identity. Additionally, though the novel highlights a number of strong women, including Oreo's mother and grandmother, Oreo's strength, intelligence, and wit are clearly conflated with masculinity.

Nevertheless, Ross's novel allows a broader understanding of identity, both racial and gender, than many other texts both during and after its time. Rather than being structured through traditional limitations, race and gender in *Oreo* become characteristics that the protagonist is free to explore beyond the boundaries of tradition, allowing her to move beyond the limited notions of womanhood defined for many minority women by the political ideologies of the 1970s, when the Black Nationalist Movement encouraged women to subsume their needs and desires to those of the race. In 1974, when Ross's novel was published, Elaine Brown became the first woman to lead the Black Panther Party. Although on the surface this suggests a progressive attitude toward women, Brown notes in her autobiography that "women recruits were reminded that they might someday be called upon to deploy their sexuality as but another weapon against the enemy" (quoted in Perkins 116). Moreover, Brown's considerable power did not shield her from "reactionary gender expectations within the Black Panther Party" (quoted in Perkins 121), and, as Brown's autobiography seems to indicate, a woman's most valuable asset was not her intelligence but her sexuality. Oreo is a character who subverts this ideology, as her intelligence is prioritized over her sexuality or, conversely, as her intelligence is maintained through the preservation of her virginity. Although both black women and black men have been sexualized in particular ways throughout history, and although both have been deemed as hypersexual, black women have been the objects of complex patriarchal quests for power.[13] As Brown notes, black women's sexuality was expected to serve the movement, either through the reproduction of revolutionaries or through

[13] Of course, black women and men have been stereotyped by white supremacist ideology as both hypersexual and non-sexual throughout history and for particular reasons. As Cornel West notes, "The dominant myths draw black women and men either as threatening creatures who have the potential for sexual power over whites, or as harmless, desexed underlings of a white culture" (119).

seductive attacks against the white enemy. Oreo, too, is depicted using her sexuality to further her aims, yet her use does not extend so far as to compromise her virginity. She overturns the historical use of women's bodies in service of men, using her body in service of her own quest.

Of course, not all within the Black Nationalist Movement wished to have women's bodies service the nation; many within the movement wished to halt the victimization of black women by white men that had begun in slavery and had been perpetuated subsequently. Many of these people, moreover, wanted black women to be respected *as* women since historical constructions of womanhood had excluded them from the category. Additionally, tension existed within the movement over whether racism and sexism were interlocking and mutually functioning systems of power that should be confronted simultaneously or whether one oppression, namely racism, should be prioritized over the other. Black women could not find adequate support for their struggle as women *and* as black people in the feminist movement, either, since many feminists at the time prioritized the needs and issues of white women.

Despite flaws within its feminist discourse, *Oreo* seems to both embrace feminist ideology and move beyond it, even to the point of critiquing degrading images that were mainly ignored by the feminist movement of the 1960s:

> Helen's letter went on to point out the implications of her formulation for the theory of the so-called black matriarchs: it tore the theory all to hell. In a later day, Helen might have gone on to add (with a slip of the pen owing to hunger): "There's no male chauvinist pork like a black male chauvinist pork." (54)

Using language that mocks much academic writing, Ross critiques the notion made explicit in the Moynihan Report (1965) that black women were responsible for the

emasculation of black men and the poverty and hardships faced by black communities as a whole; thus, Ross is a precursor of feminist critiques of black patriarchy such as Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979), refusing to ignore gender oppression not simply within the larger society but within the black community and Black Nationalist Movement as well. Critics such as Ross and Wallace resisted racial and gender oppression from their positions as *black women.* The intricacies of black women's lives and struggles were largely ignored by the larger feminist movement, as many of its proponents were white women who ignored the impact of racial difference on gender. Black feminists such as the members of The Combahee River Collective, which issued its "Black Feminist Statement" in 1977, struggled to include the interworkings of race within gender constructions. As its statement attests, "disillusionment within these liberation movements [of white women and black men]...led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white woman, and antisexist, unlike those of black and white men" (233).

Ross's Oreo departs from limited notions of womanhood that would compel her to reproduce black revolutionaries, to use her sexuality to further Black Nationalist aims, to ignore her sexuality, or to subsume either her interests as a woman or as a racial minority and person of mixed race in order to prioritize others' political agendas. Oreo's consciously chosen virginity; her comfort with her sexuality; and her strength, intelligence and self-determination create new possibilities for mixed raced women; the text offers its mixed raced protagonist as a traveler between the traditionally opposing shores of black and white, masculine and feminine. She embodies the point of contact

and exists as "two together": a successful combination of black and white, masculine and feminine, a satisfying concoction of cookie and cream.

Travelers, Questers, and Cookies

Throughout her text, Ross confronts various understandings of gender, of race and of mixed race. She attacks biological notions of race and upholds an understanding of race as contextual, shifting, and multifaceted, acknowledging that play within racial and gender identities allows individuals a greater sense of personal harmony and, likewise, could result in a utopia of greater social harmony. Contemporarily, more and more mixed race individuals are theorizing mixed race identity in just these ways. However, there is little agreement on how these individuals should position themselves both culturally and politically, possibly because "multiraciality" itself is a broad category. Yet we have seen the analysis of diverse heritages manifested in the works of authors such as Gloria Anzaldúa, who, in *Borderlands,* affirms the various cultures that constitute her heritage. Accordingly, Anzaldúa legitimizes the standpoint resulting from such a position when she writes:

> At the confluence of two or more genetic streams[14], with chromosomes constantly "crossing over," this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollinization, an "alien" consciousness is presently in the making—a new mestiza consciousness. . . . It is a consciousness of the Borderlands. (77)

Similarly, Chicana writer and poet Cherrie Moraga has discussed her position on the borderland as the daughter of a Mexican mother and an Anglo father, although she makes her position appear far less utopian: "You call this a choice! To constantly push up

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[14] Of course, Anzaldúa's reference to genetic streams is problematic, since these streams do not really exist—race is not a biological trait but a trait of social and cultural constructions.

against a wall of resistance from your own people or to fall away nameless into the mainstream of this country, running with our common blood?" (97). The metaphor of the borderland is one of displacement, of living in two worlds, living in neither. Yet Moraga is explicit in her adoption of a Chicana identity; she cannot consider herself white without betraying her people, but she has taken advantage of her ability to pass, to move more freely between the two "worlds" than other Chicanas. As she writes, "once my light skin and good English saved me and my lover from arrest. And I'd use it again. I'd use it to the hilt over and over to save our skins" (97).

An analysis of identity for the mixed race individual, then, must take into account common metaphors—such as traveler and quester—that denote the *ability* to move between worlds and the *inability* to remain fixed in one position, the ability to foreground certain pieces of identity and relegate others to the background within certain social situations. The mixed race individual, as any other, experiences life through a multitude of prisms, specifically those prisms of her various races, of gender, of sexuality, etc. It is unlikely, unless she chooses to ignore a part of her heritage, that her identity will remain constant; rather, in some situations, one portion of her ancestry will take precedence, will be foregrounded, over the others. Conversely, there may be times when components of her gender are the most salient characteristics of her life.

Oreo offers a clear use of these metaphors of traveler, of questing individual and does so in a way that acknowledges the shifting of salient characteristics given various contexts. In fact, although "Oreo is visually identifiable and self-identified as African-American, the content of her identity is formed dynamically, improvisationally, and contingently as she interacts with others, choosing from a diverse menu of sometimes

competing possibilities and influences that vary from one encounter to another" (Mullen, Foreword xxvii). I would argue that Oreo is not clearly self-identified as African-American, however, since she seems to understand race as performance, as an enactment and repetition of various characteristics that she uses to her advantage in different situations, foregrounding those most useful and allowing others to recede; within this text, performance aids in fostering notions of play within identity. For example, in Mr. Soundman's recording studio, Oreo calls upon her experience of Jewishness to perform as Tante Ruchel. In another instance she relies on stereotypes of black womanhood to perform as an uneducated maid, which allows her to gain access to medical specimens of her (now) late father in order to blackmail her grandfather. In still other instances, Oreo manipulates conventions of gender, first appearing as a helpless girl soon to be taken advantage of by a pimp, and then returning to her more fluidly gendered identity in order to perform her martial arts and free herself from the pimp's assumed control. I argue that understandings of race within the text are not *performative*, in Judith Butler's sense of the word (which I will elaborate in greater detail in my discussion of *Caucasia*), since Oreo's enactment of characteristics is not binding; instead, racial characteristics in the text are presented as *performance*, as costumes, accents, and scripts Oreo engages to accomplish her quest. None of these acts of performance becomes ontologically binding for Oreo; in fact, these acts allow a questioning of ontology and identity, demonstrating that identities contain room for "play," for shifts, contradictions, and negotiations.

Oreo, then, is both literally and figuratively a traveler, a quester. Literally, she journeys in search of her father, traveling from Philadelphia to New York, crossing borders between the worlds of black and white, wealthy and deprived, educated and

uneducated. Figuratively, she embodies the metaphor of traveler and quester in her existence as a mixed race individual of black/Jewish heritage and as a young woman who confounds the strict traditional gender divide. As Anzaldúa asserts, "A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary" (3). In Oreo's existence, the boundary is not so much delineated as vague and undetermined as much as it is ignored. Because Oreo can move so expertly and easily across that unnatural boundary, she problematizes the "violent clash" of overlap so often suggested by Anzaldúa, who writes of "many defense strategies that the self uses to escape the agony of inadequacy," confessing that she has "split from and disowned those parts of [herself] that others rejected," internalizing "rage and contempt" (45).

Oreo, though, shows no signs of self-contempt; she is perennially self-confident and comfortable with her intelligence, beauty, and abilities. Moreover, Oreo suggests a certain ease and naturalness in manipulating boundaries that troubles traditional notions of conflict and turmoil in mixed race identity; stereotypes such as the tragic mulatto emphasize a sense of conflict and unease within the mixed race individual. And narratives of passing necessitate a denial of heritage in order to achieve a (tentative and troublesome) stasis; they suggest movement in one direction only and prohibit acknowledgement of one's site of origin. Oreo, however, and numerous individuals of mixed heritage, embodies an ease and fluidity of movement more than a paralyzing confusion. She exhibits this fluidity clearly as she travels, moving confidently into various contexts and cultures, foregrounding those elements of her identity most useful to each context, literally taking up roles (such as African-American maid, and Jewish-American aunt) to gain access to disparate communities. Strikingly, Oreo is able to travel

and perform various "selves" within these contexts, to foreground specific parts of her identity and move others to the background; yet she also appears to maintain no doubts about what her mission entails, suggesting at least some sense of self that is maintained in the midst of performances.

Thus, Oreo embodies the metaphor of traveler, of one who moves and changes to suit situations; although Oreo maintains a sense of self, her understanding is tentative and limited since her journey is a search for the relevance of her origins to her identity. For this reason, Oreo varies from the traditional quest motif and demonstrates in some ways Kristina Groover's theory of women's quests—quests that do not neglect relationships or "home." Many feminist researchers note that identity for men is assumed to be distinct from home and family while for women the domestic realm is considered to be a constituting factor of identity. And, Oreo's quest *is* relationship-centered; the novel thoroughly details both her family at home as well as the people she meets along her journey. Additionally, the quest itself is driven by a relationship—that of Oreo and her father, whom she needs in order to learn the secret of her birth. However, this quest in some ways remains parallel to that of Theseus and does follow the path of the prototypical journey into the wilderness where the hero(ine) leaves behind home and family in order to learn vital self-defining information.

Oreo's quest, then, also differs from women's spiritual quests as outlined by Groover: Oreo does not remain in the domestic realm but journeys into the public world; she does not find meaning in a garden but seeks it in the "wilderness." This wilderness, however, is not the literal wilderness of the traditional male-centered quest that removes the individual from the boundaries of civilization; rather, it is a wilderness *of* civilization,

the wilderness of the city and even of public parks that are transformed into sites where the most unusual creatures are encountered. Nevertheless, this wilderness is still partially in keeping with that of traditional quests since the wilderness can be read on a figurative rather than a literal level.[15] At the same time, however, Oreo's quest demonstrates the circularity, the return to home and community, of women's spiritual quests.

Because Oreo's quest entails elements from both the male-centered and female-centered motifs, the text appears to enact a "mixing" of the masculine and feminine paradigms of spiritual quest—a fact in keeping with the other mixtures suggested by the novel, all of which suggest an element of play in the text's imaginings of race and gender. *Oreo* enacts both figurative and literal mixtures in a way that suggests the necessity of embracing dualities without hierarchy and opposition. Dualities and complements function negatively when they are not joined in a whole that affirms both components as valid and necessary. Thus, it is not the dualities themselves that must be transcended but the tendency to view dualities as oppositional and hierarchical. *Oreo* privileges this notion of complementary dualities, of opposites that are not oppositional, of difference without hierarchy. In allowing various mixtures to co-exist within her text—mixtures of race and gender, for example—Ross works within this harmonizing sense of difference and duality. As an embodiment of the metaphor of mixed race individual as traveler and quester who melds the paradigms of masculine and feminine spiritual quest, Oreo urges reconciled visions of race and gender, suggesting future possibilities for race and gender that are consistent with many contemporary discourses of mixed race. Additionally, Oreo embodies another common metaphor of mixed race identity: that of translator. And in

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[15] Groover notes that "Beginning with modernist works and throughout twentieth-century literature . . . the wilderness is a more highly symbolic one which nonetheless suggests that wisdom is to be found in the flight from home and community."

fleshing out this metaphor, Ross enacts additional mixtures within her text, crossing other traditionally delineated boundaries.

Specifically, the mixtures within Ross's novel experiment with new and varied possibilities for race, gender, identity, and language. In fact, Ross's novel blends Yiddish and African-American dialects with more formal academic language, foreign languages, and languages of the heroine's and others' invention. Oreo, for example, creates a list of terms to describe movements in her self-developed system of self-defense. Oreo's brother also invents a language when, covering his ears to prevent hearing a cat fight, he misinterprets his neighbor's words "My cat's a coward" as "Mah cassa cowah" (42).

> Jimmie C. was delighted. He decided to use this wonderful new expression as the radical for a radical second language. "Cha-key-key-wah, mah-cassa-cowah," he would sing mysteriously in front of strangers. "Freck-a-louse-poop!" Oreo recognized the value of Jimmie C.'s cha-key-key-wah language over the years. For her, it served the same purpose as black slang. She often used it on shopkeepers who lapsed into Yiddish or Italian. It was her way of saying, "Talk about mother tongues—try to figure out *this* one, you mothers." (42)

The text clearly disrupts racialized language use—even language use in general. Oreo works briefly at a recording studio—Mr. Soundman, Inc.—run by a mute African-American man who communicates via cardboard signs featuring cartoon bubbles inscribed with pre-made messages ranging from "YOU'RE LOOKING AT HIM" to "RIGHT ON." Ironically, "he had translated the typical cartoon asterisk-spiral-star-exclamation point-scribble as a straightforward FUCK YOU, YOU MUTHA" (140). Thus, Mr. Soundman makes no sound and, although he has a collection of cartoon bubbles in which he can write spontaneous messages, he appears to communicate well with his small selection of prepared messages. The fact that he can participate in a variety of conversations with a few predetermined lines suggests fluidity and interchangeability

in language and an understanding of conversations as simple fill-in-the-blank exercises. Also ironic is Oreo's standing-in for her father, who normally works at Mr. Soundman recording commercials. Oreo records a commercial for "Tante Ruchel's Frozen Passover TV Seder," a product that makes light work of but also makes light of a significant religious festival. At one point during the recording process, Mr. Soundman balloons to Oreo: "A LITTLE MORE JEWISH PLEASE" (143), allowing Ross to point to the insufficiency of language use as a gauge of race and also to disrupt expectations of gender by having Oreo, a black/Jewish girl, speak for her father, a Jewish man, who speaks for "Tante Ruchel," presumably a Jewish aunt but really a (double) work of fiction.

Ross's experimentation with language allows a glimpse into the role of language in constructing various identities as well as an acknowledgment of the playfulness inherent in language. "Oreo's linguistic prowess and her arsenal of wit enhance her self-confidence and provide her with the means to turn ordinary tasks and events into opportunities for play…she finds alternative modes of thinking and writing" (Mullen, *Not* par. 16) and, I will add, alternative modes of being and relating to others. She plays with the strictures of identity in order to reconcile the dualities within her own. The importance of language to this text cannot be underestimated, nor can its importance to the development of identity be denied. As Mullen observes, "the moment that signals [Oreo's] readiness to begin her quest for complete self-knowledge is a test of her verbal ability" (*Not* par. 16), illustrating the role of language in self-development. In this text's explorations of race and gender, a crucial consideration is the use of language as a component of identity and as a vehicle for transporting one to new possibilities of being.

An analysis of metaphors of mixed race identity in *Oreo* would not be complete without a discussion of its most prominent metaphor: that of the "Oreo." This metaphor is commonly used not only to suggest those of mixed black and white ancestry but also to suggest a capitulation to white, mainstream values by African-Americans: "black on the outside, white on the inside."[16] The connotations of this metaphor are many, suggesting a certain sweetness, edibleness, and vulnerability, connotations that are denounced by Oreo as a character—one who is more sarcastic than sweet, more apt to consume than to be consumed, more capable of self-defense than vulnerability. In fact, the text makes clear that "Oreo" is the protagonist's nickname, rather than her given name; furthermore, this nickname is depicted as a misnomer, a misunderstanding in language due to lack of understanding between people of different backgrounds and vernaculars. Using satirical allusions to the Bible, Ross writes that

> When Christine was about two and a half, she got her nickname. It came to Louise [her grandmother] in a dream. Louise was walking down a dusty road with Christine on a gray, overcast day, when suddenly the clouds parted and a ray of sunshine beamed down right in front of the child. Out of this beam of sunshine came a high-pitched, squeaky voice. "And her name shall be Oriole". . . . People had been calling the child various things as she toddled down the street after Louise, cursing them under her breath...But when they looked at Christine's rich brown color and her wide smile full of sugar-white baby teeth, they said to themselves, "Why, that child does put me in mind of an Oreo cookie—side view." And that is how Oreo got her name. Nobody knew that Louise was saying "Oriole." (39)

Ross's use of Oreo's nickname, then, both appropriates and rejects the validity of this metaphor. Additionally, it speaks to a notion of "consumption" or appropriation of discourses of mixed race identity by polarized groups, the ways in which each group vies over the meaning of mixed race in moments of racial crisis. Such appropriative

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[16] Consider also similar uses of food metaphors to describe Native Americans (apples), Asian-Americans (bananas), Latinos (coconuts), etc.

discourses often serve to consolidate traditionally reified categories of race, figuratively warring over the mixed race individual, rather than to deconstruct race and allow the individual to personify a site of union. With characteristic satire, Ross questions the assumptions underlying such acts of naming, stereotyping, and appropriating—demonstrating that not all "cookies" will crumble and that not all Oreos taste as sweet as they look.

Traveling in/as Twos

Oreo clearly offers new possibilities of being—new possibilities for women and for individuals of mixed race. In many respects, Oreo's mixed race heritage is taken for granted; it is neither taboo, tragedy, nor trophy. Yet it does contribute to new understandings of race and the possibilities and mobilities of mixed race; additionally, it fits solidly within discourses of mixed race identity that seek utopian spaces of harmony and wholeness within mixed race individuals and, by extension, within society. Likewise, the novel seeks to understand these present and future possibilities of mixed race by confronting the significance of personal and collective history and by grappling with the contradictions and tensions this history causes in the present moment. *Oreo* offers space on the map of human existence for those normally fixed at the intersection of precise lines to travel, to trek beyond the boundaries of delineated categories, and to traverse the possibilities of mobile and multi-faceted identities.

Yet given the utopian tendencies of the quest motif, it would seem that positing mixed raced existence as quest is problematic, suggesting as it does the impossibility of successful completion, the failure of attaining the desired utopia. Likewise, the notion of mixed race individual as traveler is equally problematic, since it attempts to leave behind

the conflict of the present moment and context, assuming the existence of a utopia in which the current crisis will vanish. As with all utopian longings, then, these metaphors of mixed raced identity as quest and the mixed race individual as traveler seek to displace the conflict and racial crisis of the here and now outside the realm of the unattainable utopia. After all, what is ultimately important to Oreo's identity has little to do with her predetermined utopian goal—finding her father and suddenly knowing the secret of her birth—which, after additional searching, she learns was the result of artificial insemination, again suggesting the text's difficulty in supporting the possibility of successful interracial romance. Through the secret of Oreo's birth, Ross ultimately problematizes the "extent to which identity, kinship, and heritage are constructed around race, culture, and economics" and questions "the 'natural' bond presumed to exist between parent and child" (Mullen, Foreword xxv).[17] In so doing, Ross also suggests what *is* important in constructing Oreo's identity: that Oreo is able to play with the boundaries of racial and gender identity, to foreground different parts of herself in different contexts, and to enact each of these parts in various circumstances and for various purposes. She is a utopian character not limited by stereotypes of race or gender but one who, instead, offers new options for identity through an understanding of history and through broadened understandings of the present and future. She illustrates the problematic metaphors of mixed race identity that suggest such individuals are travelers to utopian spaces of racial harmony, pioneers who may lead society to a utopian future, an understanding of racial mixture that is taken up at the end of the twentieth century by texts such as Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*. Indeed, Ross's character is a precursor for later

[17] The presence of artificial insemination may suggest artificiality within racial mixture. Conversely, it could be read as a comment on the *diminished* importance of the father's presence, not only after birth but even at conception.

imaginings of mixed race; she is representative of metaphors that acknowledge an Oreo is made of both cookie and cream, that suggest the mixed raced individual is "two together," no matter where that one (or two-in-one) may travel.

CHAPTER 5
RE-VISIONS OF DIFFERENCE IN DANZY SENNA'S *CAUCASIA*

Disappearing: The Skin We're In

I have disappeared several times that I can remember. For instance . . .

Once, when I was married, I perused an antique store with my husband (who looks older than his age) and my mother-in-law (who looks younger than her age), and we were approached by a store employee offering assistance. "What are you and your husband looking for?" she asked my mother-in-law, glancing next at my husband. Of course, there were embarrassed chuckles all around when my husband informed her that the woman whom she mistook as his wife was really his mother and that his wife was really me, whom she didn't seem to have noticed at all. I felt like a brown-skinned shadow, as if I must have blended into the woodwork around us and thereby been rendered invisible. In the instant after the woman asked her question, I felt the weight of stereotypical assumptions attempting to deny both a part of my identity and the legitimacy of my desire. Having seen my body, the woman promptly determined where and with whom I didn't belong, passing her eyes over me like an eraser wiping away a pencil mark. As seer, she had the power to make me figuratively disappear.

Another example . . .

In January 2003, I was involved in an automobile accident in which the police had to be summoned. Afterwards, with the copy of the police report in hand, I went about my business, sure that the situation and the involved parties had been clear. But reviewing the

report later, I noticed two things: one, the man at fault was described as "BM" [black male]; two, the person he rear-ended was described as "WF" [white female]. Startled, I double-checked the names of the two involved. Yes, there was the man's name, and there was mine, so who was this white female the officer had claimed was present for an accident in which both parties had variations of brown skin? To be clear, let me insist that there is no mistaking me for a tanned white woman, though I have been labeled as Indian, South Asian, Mexican…none of which constitute whiteness in the United States. Did the officer see my white husband, who arrived after the accident, and privilege his race? Did I become merely a reflection of my husband? Could the officer not fathom a marriage that didn't match the norm? Or was something else altogether affecting his reading of me and my body? Does my body encourage body fictions of which I am not even aware, those that would seem to hold no validity whatsoever? Once again, I felt myself disappearing, for if the officer could call me a white woman, then he clearly could not see me.

In the first instance, my brown skin made me disappear from the woman's recognition. In the second, my brown skin itself "disappeared" because inexplicably it was ignored, causing invisibility for me once again. In each instance, my body played an integral role: first, it became all of me; then, it became none. Of course, historical forces are crucial in shaping "who I am" with reference to the body I inhabit. Historically, those on the lower end of hierarchies have been associated with the body—women as opposed to men and people of color as opposed to whites. We may see ourselves outside of or beyond our bodies, but society typically uses our bodies, especially if we are relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy, as points of reference or even as maps of our identities. "The

body has . . . been at the center of feminist theory precisely because it offers no . . . 'natural' foundation for our pervasive cultural assumptions about femininity. Indeed, there is a tension between women's lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings inscribed on the female body that always mediate those experiences" (Conboy, et al 1). Reflecting this tension, the identities we establish for ourselves may be at odds with the meanings inscribed on our bodies; thus, our identities may "disappear" because of social forces that locate our identities through cultural interpretations of bodies. Rarely, our bodies themselves may "disappear" or be ignored, as when people claim colorblindness in a misguided attempt to avoid racism. Our bodies may play tricks on us; they may lead people who "read" them to conclusions other than those we intend, all unsettling possibilities—certainly so for those whose bodies seemingly are in contradiction with their self-defined identities, as is sometimes the case with those of mixed race.

Such philosophical and theoretical questions are common in novels dealing with mixed race, which struggle with issues of play in racial identity, with the performativity of race, and with the law and its interpellation of bodies. Such novels, additionally, long for a utopia, a space beyond the law and beyond history, where identity is not subject to interpellation or the confines of the past. As it did in my opening anecdote, the law calls on various bodies to be raced in specific ways. Those whose racial affiliation is not in keeping with their visible bodies are interpellated and externally defined as the law sees fit, often in contradiction to their self-definitions. The invisibility of their identities keeps their bodies under indictment since, according to the law, identity and body should correspond. Such individuals are forced to confront the "misrepresentation" of their identities through conformity to the law or are forced to remain under indictment by

assuming an identity contradicted by their bodies. In the latter instance, individual ontology is challenged by the body, while in the former instance, ontology is subject to disappearance.

In her satirical essay "The Mulatto Millennium," Danzy Senna describes her fear of disappearing, "of being swallowed whole by the great white whale" (18). Senna seems to resist, in part, the potential depreciation in black political power if mixed-race Americans continue to emphasize their blended heritages. Additionally, there is a danger that not only political clout will be lost but cultural uniqueness as well; it is likewise feasible that blackness itself could be lost through miscegenation. Although countless theorists predict the "browning of America" (mainly through immigration) during the coming century, interracial mixture in areas of white majority would serve to produce a gradually whiter and whiter society. Though the myth of atavism—which suggested the possibility of a genetic throwback, the possibility that "blackness will out"—was widely held throughout the nineteenth century, such a throwback is a genetic impossibility. Yet many found, and still find, frightening this invisible blackness and this threat of the resurgence of that blackness (Williamson 103). Nevertheless, in a country where whites still are the majority,[1] it is not the erasure of whiteness that would result from interracial mixture (as many white supremacists contend)[2] but the erasure of blackness.[3]

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[1] Extrapolations from the census predict that Hispanics will constitute the majority in the United States by 2050.

[2] See *White Man Falling: Race, Fender, and White Supremacy* by Abby L. Ferber for a detailed study of the fear-filled motivations surrounding white supremacists movements.

[3] Lawrence R. Tenzer describes the genetic processes whereby skin color is determined. Unlike eye color, which is dependent upon dominant and recessive genes, producing only a set number of eye color possibilities, skin color results from a blending of the parents' genes; thus, far greater numbers of skin color are possible. And through continual mixture with "whiteness," skin color will continually lighten (107). Therefore, the offspring of a white and a black parent will always be lighter in skin color than the black parent.

The disappearance of blackness within those of mixed race is a prominent theme of Senna's 1998 novel *Caucasia* since for many people, as Senna states in an interview, "the mulatto represents assimilation, the end of blackness, and the end of the discussion on racism" (Arias 448).[4] A popular novel hailed as a national bestseller, *Cauacasia* details the childhood and adolescence of Birdie, a black/white biracial girl, during the 1970s and early 1980s. Because Birdie's phenotype is indeterminate, her grandmother insists that Birdie could be Sicilian or Italian or any more highly ranked ethnicity than black. Birdie accompanies her white mother, Sandy, when the latter feels she must flee the authorities after participating in illegal activities during the Black Power movement. Because Birdie's older sister Cole is brown-skinned, curly-haired, and gray-eyed, with "a face that betrayed all of its origins" (49), she leaves with their black father, Deck, for Brazil, a country where the characters believe there is no racial strife—a utopia of racial harmony. Even Birdie and her sister's names are indicative of their respective identities; Cole's name is synonymous with blackness, while Birdie's suggests mobility and even indeterminacy.[5] Birdie's narrative begins: "A long time ago I disappeared" (1). *Caucasia* is the story of her disappearance and her subsequent struggle to re-envision herself. The novel's genre and popularity have allowed it to comment on mixed race identity at a time when the topic has moved visibly into public discourse. Because of its setting in the 1970s and 1980s, the novel highlights the meanings of mixed race after the active period of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Like *Oreo*, the novel recalls the era of Black Nationalism but appears to move more fully beyond it, to project itself into a future

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[4] Of course, the sociocultural disappearance of blackness through the reality of race mixture is a possibility only if those of mixed race reject their blackness. Alternatives to this disappearance are available when those of mixed heritage seek to affirm their minority or both their minority and their majority heritages.

[5] When Birdie is born, her parents cannot agree on a name for her, so her birth certificate reads "Baby Lee" and she is known by the nickname her sister gave her.

where negotiations of mixed race are mapped through political questions like the census; in other words, *Caucasia*, though set thirty years ago, parallels the lives of many people of mixed race who currently are confronted with determining the possibilities of a public space amenable to identities of mixed race. In addition to the themes shared by all of the texts under discussion—utopian visions of harmony and wholeness, absent fathers, the possibility of play within identity allowed by notions of duality that emphasize complementarity over hierarchy and opposition—*Caucasia* struggles with notions of invisibility and power; with the role of bodies in shaping identities; with movement and belonging; with questions of racial ontology, performance, and performativity; and with the failure of historical paths toward racial harmony.

As a family drama, the novel shows that harmony and wholeness are tenuous even within the supposed security of a family, but it refuses to locate the mixed raced individual solely in the domestic realm. Instead, it posits the meanings of mixed race when the individual finds herself beyond the boundaries of home and cast into the public world. Birdie enters this world and figuratively passes into the belly of the great white whale as she escapes with her mother into white, middle-class America, the America her blue-blooded mother considers authentic, but her escape is predicated upon her invisibility. The disappearance of which she speaks, then, is the disappearance of her blackness as she passes as white. Yet the novel suggests that both blackness and whiteness at times constitute performances for her; Birdie has to adopt the dress and speech patterns of her black classmates, who mistake her for white, and she has to ignore her blackness and adopt the codes of whiteness when she and her mother enter white America. The "play" suggested by racial performance, part of the type of play I describe

as a shifting and destabilization of racial categories, becomes in this text an act of survival, thus denouncing any hint of romanticism or freedom from struggle in the idea of play and in reference to the lives of those of mixed race. The novel depicts only one site of authenticity for Birdie—in the "mirror" she and her sister provide for each other. The attic room they share as children becomes a utopian site exclusive of the forces of the outer world, a space where Birdie can act as herself, freed from the specific racial performances the world demands outside; this is the only space in which she can be, without conflict, the daughter of her white mother and black father.

Bodies at Play: Performing (and Being) Race(d)

In the outside world where she escapes with her mother, Birdie's body provides her with invisibility and is the costume of her performance. In the world of her childhood, her body initially is ignored. Alluding to the ways in which bodies shape identities, the first named chapter in *Caucasia* is titled "Face" and begins: "Before I ever saw myself, I saw my sister. When I was still too small for mirrors, I saw her as the reflection that proved my own existence" (5). Recalling the notion of the mirror stage when individuals discover they exist because they can be recognized by others, Birdie's statement illustrates the importance of her sister to her own identity as well as the importance of bodies in definitions of self and others. It is Cole's face that Birdie comes to recognize and imagine as her own; she does not even realize their differences in skin color and hair texture until these are pointed out to her. Birdie and Cole imagine themselves part of a utopia created in their own fantasies; as Birdie states

> I had some vague understanding that beyond our window, outside the attic, lay danger—the world, Boston, and all the problems that came with the city. When Cole and I were alone in our attic, speaking Elemeno [a language they created] and making cities out of stuffed animals, it seemed

> that the outside world was as far away as Timbuktu—some place that could never touch us. We were the inside, the secret and fun and make-believe, and that was where I wanted to stay. (6)

Birdie, however, is forced into that world outside, thereby forcing her away from the paradise she believes she shares with Cole as well as the paradise of being surrounded by blackness in her community and school. Interestingly, as Cole explains to Birdie, the Elemenos "were a shifting people, constantly changing their form, color, pattern, in a quest for invisibility" (7), and this becomes the challenge for those of mixed race as well as they seek the type of invisibility that allows belonging concurrently with a visibility in which they are seen for who they believe themselves to be. For Birdie, the initial desire for invisibility is driven by a need for safety in a hostile world—literally the world in which her mother believes the FBI chases her, but figuratively the world in which having a black father and a white mother would make Birdie stand out as something undesirable and dangerous. The text depicts her body, then, as both the tool for her salvation and the fact of that which makes her unsafe; Birdie's body allows her mobility but is also characterized as "a federal offense" (303). The novel questions in which realm Birdie should exist—in the white realm, where she would be bound by the law's authority and the call to perform whiteness,[6] or in the black realm, where her body would be held under indictment.

Significantly, then, the novel suggests that the only space of "authenticity" for those of mixed race is a space freed from the competing pressures of both whiteness and blackness; it is not necessarily a raceless space but a space where races are held in the equilibrium of duality, beyond hierarchy and opposition, a space where play is allowed

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[6] Of course, for Birdie, this white realm is not a pure space; instead, it is haunted by the blackness in her history and memory.

free reign. It is a space that, of course, does not exist within the social sphere. Nevertheless, the novel continues to struggle with the search for such a space, and Birdie's quest becomes a search for a psychological utopia.[7] Such a utopia would allow the individual to be freed from social forces that demand her disappearance; it is a search, therefore, for a space in which she can be visible, truly seen and recognized.

Implicit in Birdie's claim that "I" disappeared by passing into whiteness is the understanding that the identity of most individuals of mixed race has necessarily encompassed blackness, yet this claim does not imply sole black identification for those individuals. The "I" suggests that there is nothing left of Birdie Lee when she becomes the white, Jewish girl Jesse Goldman. Although the identity of a mixed race individual may rest on the reality of *both* her father and her mother, the text at times challenges the possibility of a specifically *mixed race* identity through the one-drop rule. Additionally, it questions the play allowed in racial identities, given historical notions of race and despite popular notions of race as performative. Thus, in addition to addressing the role of bodies in shaping identities, the text questions the meanings of racial ontology and racial performance. As Deck asserts, "In a country as racist as this, you're either black or you're white. And no daughter of mine is going to pass" (27). Her sister, too, emphasizes that Birdie's blackness should dominate, even though Birdie is so light-skinned and straight-haired that other children "mistake" her for white. Cole defends Birdie and simultaneously makes known her own identification by saying, "Birdie isn't white. She's black. Just like me" (48).

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[7] Petteri Pietikainen defines psychological utopia as "a form of utopian thought in which the attainment of an ideal state of consciousness requires the employment of psychological insights and methods that are effective in transforming human personality and, thereby, the whole society or culture" (41).

Birdie, though, is awed by and envious of Cole's body. Instead of being non-descript and open to innumerable interpretations by the viewer, Cole's body is more readily defined in a specific way. Cole's darker skin and curlier hair identify her as a person of color, a fact that Birdie envies. When she and Cole enter the Afrocentric school Nkrumah, they soon realize, as Cole remarks, that their mother "doesn't know anything about raising a black child" (53). Although Cole defends Birdie's blackness, she is chided for her ashy knees and unmanaged hair until she discovers lotion and convinces her father to let his girlfriend take her to a black hair care salon. Subsequently, Cole and Birdie begin to experiment with their images, using make-up, studying fashion trends, adopting hairstyles that are popular with their peers. These manipulations do not alter Birdie's sense of her difference, but they do make her "more conscious of [her] body as a toy, and of the ways [she] could use it to disappear into the world around [her]" (65).

Despite the difference between her body and Cole's, at times, Birdie's character seems to assert a thoroughly black identity: "My mother did that sometimes, spoke of Cole as if she had been her only black child. It was as if my mother believed that Cole and I were so different. As if she believed I was white, believed I was Jesse" (275). Of course, the text itself questions whether or not Birdie actually becomes white, becomes Jesse during her exile with her mother: "Maybe I had actually become Jesse," Birdie fears, "and it was this girl, this Birdie Lee who haunted these streets, searching for ghosts, who was the lie" (329). As the text asks whether "whiteness were contagious," whether it "affected the way [Birdie] walked, talked, dressed, danced, and at its most advanced stage, the way [Birdie] looked at the world and at other people" (329), race becomes not only something that is performed but something that is performed so

thoroughly and convincingly that its essentialized characteristics become adopted, internalized, experienced, and believed. It becomes *real* in a very experiential sense. The text, then, questions whether racial performativity becomes racial ontology,[8] whether, in living as a member of one race an individual actually becomes accordingly raced.[9] As Judith Butler has argued in terms of gender identity,

> *gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence . . . gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. (*GT* 33)

Race is similarly performative; it is "produced" and "compelled" by enactments of race and by forces of interpellation. Through these processes of interpellation, individuals are called to be "raced" in specific ways; this call often takes the form of a requirement since the caller occupies a position of authority, a position that is capable of calling the addressee into the experience, the ontology, of a specific role. In this way, then, social dictates most often call an individual of mixed racial heritage to be raced as black. The text also suggests that one who is freed through phenotype to perform whiteness as well may, in fact, *be* white through the power of a binding act that is continually reiterated:

> Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech: most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power. Implicated in a network of authorization and punishment, performatives tend to include legal sentences, [etc.] . . . statements which not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed. If the power of discourse to produce that which it names is linked with the question of

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[8] Truly, this notion of an ontology of race could only be possible through performance and projection since racial being cannot be based on biology.

[9] However, the text also demonstrates that such performativity cum ontology is based on notions of hypodescent, for Sandy does not become black through living among and adopting the predominant codes of African-Americans.

> performativity, then the performative is one domain in which power acts *as* discourse. (Butler, *Bodies* 225)

Birdie is not acting "as if" she were white; the very act of reiterating whiteness—and of being interpellated as white by the law, which sees bodies as definitive of identities—makes it ontologically binding for her. Performativity and reiteration lend substance, rather than attributes that, as in performance, can be taken on and off. However, the same "freedom" of performativity is not allowed for individuals with more precisely determined phenotypes—such as Cole and Sandy. Thus, performativity can suggest ontology only given other, specific (or un-specifiable?) characteristics. Birdie's character can claim that she has disappeared, perhaps ceased to exist, because of her performativity of race; this performativity, the text suggests, may have erased the ontological Birdie altogether and replaced her with another being, Jesse, for "[t]here is no [racial] identity behind the expressions of [race]; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, *GT* 33).

In addition to emphasizing the performativity of race, the novel also highlights the reality of race in daily lives and the primary role bodies play in making race "real." Cole comments about their father, "He's right, you know. About it all being constructed. But . . . that doesn't mean it doesn't exist" (408). The visible clues to social identity are often those located upon bodies, and the text suggests that the paradise Birdie and Cole shared is lost, in part, due to the response individual bodies elicit in the social world; separated from other bodies that served as markers for her own, the protagonist is cast out of the relative diversity of the city and relocated to a small, rural, and homogeneous

wilderness equated with the 'real' America.[10] As Birdie laments at the beginning of the novel, she disappears within the whiteness of America because of the body in which she moves about the world. She has only this body and "a memory of something lost" (1). America becomes the easiest place to lose oneself because of pressures toward assimilation and also because of assumptions readily made on the basis of bodies. Since Birdie is described as a well-tanned white girl, her body betrays the identity she has held for herself as black. After years of allowing her body to be taken at face value, Birdie begins to forget the identity she believed was true; she forgets her black father and brown-skinned sister and begins to accept what her body tells others: she is Jesse, a white Jewish girl: "I would become white—white as my skin, hair, bones allowed. My body would fill in the blanks, tell me who I should become, and I would let it speak for me" (1). Only when she is identified as black by a black classmate does Birdie realize who she is, who she has become, and what she has lost: the paradise of truly being seen.

Appearing in the Mirroring

The text suggests that the longing for visibility and recognition are the catalysts in the search for affective relationships, namely Birdie's search to find her sister and father. This search continues Birdie's travels in the larger world and demonstrates, as does *Oreo* and other mixed race literature, the prominence of tropes of mobility and travel in texts dealing with mixed race. And as with other motifs within this text—such as visibility and invisibility, performativity and ontology—travel and mobility are facilitated (or limited)

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[10] According to an Associated Press article dated June 2002, the 2000 census revealed a "decline in the number of people identifying themselves as being of Irish, German, and other European ancestries" and a "relatively small, but growing, number of people who . . . are simply calling themselves American." The article suggests a correlation between the two populations, indicating that an increasing number of people of European descent are identifying as American and, perhaps, encouraging the notion that those of European ancestry are *the* Americans, without need of hyphenation.

by bodies. As Birdie narrates, "I disappeared into America, the easiest place to get lost. Dropped off, without a name, without a record. With only the body I traveled in" (1). Because Cole's body is a more definitive marker of her race, she is not allowed the mobility her mother and sister experience; instead, she joins her black father and his black girlfriend as they travel to Brazil where they anticipate racial harmony. Cole's determinacy does not allow her access to the same communities Birdie and her mother enter, thus demonstrating that the search for sites of belonging is limited by the body in which one travels. Unlike *Oreo*, *Caucasia* does not celebrate mixed race identity as movement; rather, it searches for a site of visibility and for the recapture of an assumed paradise lost or utopia where the individual was seen and accepted. Movement in this text, then, is propelled not by a search for origins but by the realization that the current space is so filled with conflict and opposition that it threatens one's being with invisibility. The text suggests a search for a utopia where those of mixed race can be seen as they see themselves—for example, as Birdie and Cole initially see each other: secure individuals with a white mother and black father who belong to and are accepted as vital members of an interracial family—rather than through the social fictions of the one-drop rule or passing. As mentioned, the utopia in this text is not a literal space but a psychological one, created through the act of seeing each other as each sees herself—initially as a functioning member of a family that does not reflect the norm but exists by valuing affect over superficialities, by valuing dualities over hierarchies and oppositions; such honest recognition, moreover, would likely alter the social space as well.

Metaphors of mixed race identity in *Caucasia*—which I am suggesting encompass the tensions of movement and belonging, visibility and invisibility, power and performativity—reflect the longing for a site where the lost paradise of Birdie and Cole's relationship can be reclaimed, where blackness need not war with whiteness, where the mixed raced individual need not be made invisible through passing as white or through adherence to the one-drop rule; this site is depicted as the psychological utopia shared between Birdie and Cole, symbolized by their attic bedroom, where the external world did not intrude upon their visions of themselves. It is a space where blackness is allowed, not made invisible or swallowed by the great whale of whiteness. And it is a space where whiteness is allowed; yet, importantly, it is a space where the children's parents, representative in the text of their respective races, rarely trespass. At one point when Birdie's mother enters the space, she plays a game wherein she disguises herself and pretends to be a wicked monster who has taken the place of their mother. When they were younger, this game both frightened and delighted the girls; yet as they grow older, the game bores them, well aware as they are of the realities of their mother's existence and her whiteness, despite the life she has chosen among black communities.

The text's references to disappearances of race and the invisibility of mixed race illustrate that whiteness, along with its privilege and power, remains despite political choices that are meant to relinquish that whiteness. Thus their mother Sandy's "disappearance" into a black community and the family she created with her black husband Deck is no true disappearance. Her whiteness continues to function as a badge, as a type of property, despite her ideologies. The same cannot be said, however, of blackness, as the text shows in numerous ways. When the family drives together through

racist white sections of Boston, the disappearing game Deck is forced to play is noticeably different from Sandy's. Compelled to crouch on the floor of the car and hide under a blanket, Deck turns his hiding into a game for the children, but it is a game in which he lacks agency. He, unlike Sandy, cannot ignore his racial category and traverse racially demarcated communities with the same ease. Unlike Sandy, he cannot distance his racial category from his identity, ignoring the former while maintaining the latter. Instead, his racial self is undeniably linked to his entire body, his entire being, and hiding one necessitates hiding the others. The text makes clear, then, the mobility and agency allowed by whiteness and the limits imposed upon blackness, limits that potentially force individuals to the point of disappearance. In so doing, the text questions the mobility and agency of those of mixed race, suggesting through two sisters with different phenotypes that individual bodies determine one's access to mobility, one's power through invisibility, and one's identity through visibility.

Because of Birdie's 'white' body, she is able to disappear, to seem invisible by blending in with the white majority. Birdie, however, like her mother, wants to reject the power of whiteness. Although her mother eventually succumbs to the luxury of maintaining the status quo, only criticizing it in ways that do not compromise her own comfort, Birdie acknowledges her performance of whiteness as a charade, an act of passing that results in a denial and eventual forgetting of her father and sister. She begins to slip into the comfort of her white skin until she is "outed" as black by a black classmate. Thus, the novel illustrates specific negotiations of race and mixed race, including the challenges faced by those who may long for spaces of multiracial affirmation but must face the pull of forces toward assimilation to whiteness.

Experiencing whiteness allows Birdie to give testament to the theory that "white people find their power in invisibility, while the rest of us remain bodies for them to study and watch" (72). The text struggles with questions of power in relation to visibility and invisibility, at times demonstrating that invisibility (for whites) brings power while invisibility (for people of color) strips power from the individual. In adopting whiteness, Birdie does become invisible; she is able to hide as Jesse Goldman, ignoring the racist remarks of her schoolmates and pretending that such comments do not condemn her as well as the persons at whom they are aimed. Importantly, the novel demonstrates that, due to the oppositional construction of blackness and whiteness, mixed raced individuals are encouraged to deny either their blackness—if they, like Birdie, can "pass"—or their whiteness—the more common occurrence.[11]

In addition to, perhaps *through*, its demonstrations of the uneven power of whiteness and blackness, the text also shows that blackness and whiteness have been at war with one another—Birdie's parents' relationship represents larger social struggles on an individual level and suggests the struggle historically assumed to take place within the mixed raced individual; their war is representative of the social war, and liberal whites such as Sandy can be seen attempting to renounce whiteness but never able to sustain the project. Her choice to ignore her whiteness (until the moment when she needs to take advantage of her white privilege) does not diminish its power or its presence. In fact, her eventual refuge in whiteness demonstrates how difficult sustained renunciation of power and privilege can be; Sandy slips easily back into white middle-class society,

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[11] In making the claim that whiteness should not be made invisible, I am not suggesting that it should be prioritized over blackness. It is clear that white supremacy is detrimental to individuals, communities, and nations, but in ignoring the whiteness within mixed race individuals, we risk an inversion of the hierarchy of blackness and whiteness. By disclaiming whiteness because of its representation in the "white devils" of the world, we are merely recreating the divisive dichotomies with which America has so long contended.

romanticizing less privileged whites as she had romanticized blacks when she lived among them. Conversely, blacks such as Deck struggle through movements such as Civil Rights and Black Power but become co-opted by the ivory tower; he argues against race from within the comfort zone allowed him by the social system in which whiteness still dominates and maintains power. Even the admission of endearments between Sandy and Deck do not reflect acceptance and parity; they do not say "I love you" but rather "I miss you," suggesting that many whites and blacks, in addition to those of mixed race, long for a site where they need not relate as adversaries and racial representatives but may relate as allies and individuals. The struggle is in locating or creating that space, and the text demonstrates that neither Sandy's liberal militancy nor Deck's intellectual theorizing succeeds in realizing that space.

Longing and Belonging

After Birdie, Deck is the character who most consistently searches for such a utopian space, yet his absence from Birdie's life complicates the notion that any space he may find might include individuals like Birdie. Deck's absence is in keeping with the motif of absent black fathers in many texts concerning mixed race women. As these women struggle to negotiate the boundaries of race while under the care of their white mothers, they are denied access to supportive black paternity, and this denial reflects the historical systems that denied and continue to deny black fatherhood. In so many of these texts, a driving force behind the protagonist's mobility is the search for her missing black father, suggesting that mixed race women desire to know and be seen by black men. The implications here concern both race and gender, since these mixed race women often can be viewed as longing for blackness (not necessarily to the exclusion of whiteness) as well

as for the father. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir, "If her father shows affection for his daughter, she feels that her existence is magnificently justified; she is endowed with all the merits that others have to acquire with difficulty; she is fulfilled and deified. All her life she may longingly seek that lost state of plenitude and peace" (287).[12] In the case of mixed raced women in the texts under discussion, the longing for the father's acceptance also can be read as a longing to incorporate and be accepted within blackness. This longing illustrates the shortcomings of the one-drop rule when it is held up against individual lives and families; although these women would be classified as black, their experiences within white communities and with white mothers problematize any easy acceptance of the one-drop rule. Whether depicted as seeking their fathers in order to identify as black *solely* or black *in addition to*, the desire to find the absent black father demonstrates the wrinkles of identity and identification.

As with the other motifs under discussion, Birdie's relationship with her father—as well as her identity and her self-identification—is complicated by her body, notably in one scene when Birdie and her father are seen as suspect when they relax in a park. A white couple asks two white police officers to intervene in what they assume is an unlawful (or, at least undesirable) relationship between the two: they assume Deck has kidnapped a white child. Birdie and Deck's insistence that they are father and daughter is not believed, and the officers assume Birdie is calling Deck her father out of fear and coercion; one officer asks Birdie, "Did the man touch you funny?" (61). Thus, the text demonstrates the ways in which bodies subvert individual claims to identity and familial relationships. Moreover, the text tropes on fears of potent black male sexuality, danger,

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[12] In *Caucasia*, Cole in some ways stands in for this father figure since she is the source of Birdie's lost "plentitude and peace" and the ultimate aim of Birdie's search.

and degeneracy. In demonstrating these stereotypes, however, the text struggles with its own latent fears of father-daughter incest—incest being another recurrent theme in mixed raced literature, as Werner Sollors has shown. Before the officers approach, Birdie lay in the grass "with [her] head on [her father's] stomach, so that [their] bodies made a T" (59). After the incident, Deck is distant with Birdie, who narrates: "Usually he kissed me on the top of my head before he said goodbye, but this time he just touched my forehead with the back of his hand, as if he were checking for a fever. His own hand was cold, and he pulled it away quickly, as if the touch had burned him" (61). The text struggles with the problem of father-daughter intimacy when it becomes complicated by issues of race, in this case superficial markers of race such as skin color, since Deck does not demonstrate a similar awkwardness around Cole. Thus, the law implicates not only an individual's racial identity through interpellation but also individual and familial relationships through restrictions on sexuality and behavior. The text suggests the pervasive power of the law in both defining and restricting identities and relationships, illustrating that—having no utopia—individuals are bound by the law. Additionally, the text asks questions regarding how a daughter relates to a distant and subsequently absent black father who takes on a greater importance through his absence.

Birdie is depicted exploring issues of sexual intimacy throughout the text with people who are notably different from those whom she has loved. The homoerotic encounters between Birdie and her white friend at the women's commune and her intimate encounters with Alex, a white boy who befriends her in New Hampshire, are significant. Birdie is depicted searching for intimacy with people who are unlike those people whose intimate relationships she has lost—her black/mixed raced sister and her

black father. Predictably, neither of these explorations Birdie undertakes appears to satisfy the absence she feels without her sister and her father. Of course, when Birdie finds her father again, she discovers that the image she'd carried of him—as a man who would return for her—was decidedly grander than the real man—who hadn't made any notable effort to find her. The absent father assumed larger significance than the actual man, suggesting the significance of parental relationships—even those experienced mostly through memory—to racial identity; the social pressures that often lead to disappointments in black fatherhood; and the forces that constrain many black men, limiting their ability to be fathers in healthy relationships with their daughters.

In addition to functioning as a longing for her absent father, Birdie's search for Deck also is predicated on her desire to find her sister, a relationship which I have suggested illustrates the means by which individuals find themselves through recognition by another. Deck—the intellectual, postmodern entity in the novel—complicates the experiences Birdie has lived with theories that seek to discount those experiences. His theories of racelessness and his endeavors to find spaces of racial harmony not "based on bodies and where they fit in the world" are shown to be utopian and naïve since Birdie's experiences demonstrate without question the persistence of race as a marker of difference if not a biological fact (320). When she reunites with him at the end of the novel, Deck insists upon the illusionary nature of race, but Birdie points to reality: "If race is so make-believe, why did I go with Mum? You gave me to Mum 'cause I looked white. You don't think that's real? Those are the facts" (393). Deck functions as the postmodern voice in the novel, suggesting as he does that race is simply a costume that Birdie is able to switch. Thus, when Birdie finds her father, she also finds someone who

is disembodied by intellectualism, without human relationships and, presumably, without much attention to bodily concerns.[13] Birdie does not find recognition and acceptance or belonging[14] with her father but simply theories that come up empty when contrasted with the life she's lived. The text suggests that answers to questions regarding mixed race identity cannot be found solely through postmodern theories and the intellect; rather, identity questions must acknowledge experiences and must involve human interaction and recognition—both of the body and beyond it.

In addition to suggesting the performative nature of race facilitated by notions of the body as costume, Deck also insists that the "fate of the mulatto in history and literature...will manifest the symptoms that will eventually infect the rest of the nation" (393). Deck's use of the archaic and racist term mulatto, a metaphor based on the assumed biological difference of those of mixed race, is a strange disjuncture from his more postmodern views on the performative nature of race. Such a disjuncture points to the continued struggle between notions of race as a social construction and persistent notions that still suggest biological difference among the races. In addition to struggling with this tension, the novel also struggles with locating the path toward racial harmony, ultimately demonstrating the failure of most efforts—those militant efforts like Sandy's as well as those intellectual efforts like Deck's. The most utopian space allowed by the novel is that shared in the sheltered innocence of Birdie and Cole's childhood, in the mirror mixed raced individuals provide for each other—by Birdie and Cole as children and by the multicultural community among whom Cole lives when Birdie finds her. The

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[13] When Birdie reunites with her father, she notes that what he feeds her "was good in an artificial kind of way" (395), suggesting that he cannot provide the "nourishment" she'd been seeking. Additionally, "He ate the way he always had . . . as if weighed down with thoughts" (395).

[14] Even when Deck glances at her from time to time, he does not see Birdie but instead sees how much she looks like his mother.

latter space is one that is not exclusively black but one that is notably absent of whiteness.

Appearing in Motion and Blurring the Lines

Prior to encountering this space, Birdie is swept into the whiteness of America, a nation and nationality that are equated with whiteness, and her blackness is threatened with invisibility and even demise. The text demonstrates the mixed raced individual's struggle to maintain blackness along with whiteness—the utopian vision of wholeness common among all of these texts under discussion—but concludes with the individual's renunciation of a particular whiteness that maintains the status quo (personified by Birdie's mother) and the search for a space of diversity and mixture. Despite this desire for diversity, the space that is found lacks whiteness. Thus, although the text seeks a harmony of black and white, the "paradise" it illustrates is not a space where blackness and whiteness can co-exist without opposition and hierarchy but a space in which whiteness is absent, perhaps even invisible—a significantly problematic suggestion given the power whiteness has gained through its invisibility. Additionally, however, the text contradicts this renunciation of whiteness through Cole, who desires and initiates contact with her mother at the end of the novel. Relinquished by her white mother and claimed by her black father because of her phenotype, Cole seeks reunification—the reunion with her mother symbolizing the longing for reunification of blackness and whiteness within the mixed raced individual so that no parts of the self are denied.

Conversely, the text longs for and seeks utopia while at times asserting that such a paradise does not exist at all. It seeks a peaceful union of blackness and whiteness at the same time it asserts that conflicts of blackness and whiteness are diminished through

separatism and that people of color may need to form spaces of seclusion where mixture and diversity, rather than fallacies of "purity," are the norm.[15] It suggests that individuals of mixed race, whose literary history has insisted on their inability to belong, may find acceptance only among others who have been marginalized. These "outcasts" may then form their own communities where the differences that resulted in their marginalization may become the social glue of a new community. *Caucasia* considers this option for individuals of mixed race as they seek freedom from racial conflict and seek spaces that resist their erasure. It does not, however, comment upon the problematic nature of attempting to form identity and community through negation of the larger culture, unifying around a perceived lack, rather than through affirmation of the smaller culture, unifying around inherent assets.

The utopia suggested by the text, then, is one that is only briefly glimpsed by Birdie through her relationship with her sister; interestingly, this utopian moment is not of the future but is a moment of nostalgia for the past, the lost paradise of childhood where Birdie and Cole were isolated from the realities of the outside world.[16] Although the text longs for the past, it does so in a way that attempts to acknowledge but not be bound by its effects. The text wants to become ahistorical in the utopian sense, yet it makes clear that one cannot step outside of history since history, as Fredric Jameson has argued, is always found in the present moment. Indeed, *Caucasia* is greatly influenced by questions of history and the philosophical and theoretical impact of history on racial

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[15] Carol Roh Spaulding has suggested that secession, in addition to abjection and prescription, is one of the major themes within mixed race literature. She associates secession with the "symbolic exile" of individuals who "choose a way out of their conflict by finding a way out of their culture" and likens this to Homi Bhabha's Third Space, which she defines as "that alien territory that makes possible an alternative identity beyond the concept of margin and center and beyond the concept of pure or essential racial types" (105).

[16] This utopia is in keeping with Adam Roberts's analysis of utopias, which "have often not solved the problems of society but just expelled them outside their boundaries" (108).

identities. It struggles to acknowledge history while attempting to point to a utopian space that would be necessarily beyond history. In this way, it longs for a utopian space freed from the present history, rather than attempting to imagine a "future history," a future in which the history of the present moment could be acknowledged.

This paradox of wanting to both acknowledge and escape history leads the novel to its nostalgic sense of utopia in the relationship between Birdie and Cole. Their relationship constitutes what Michele Hunter calls "difference from difference" (304), arguing "the differences between two mixed-race women, and the possibilities they inspire, provide an alternative model for defining difference" (298). The prevalent argument between essentialism and social construction results in notions of difference that rely on binaries:

> In such formulations, difference is conceived of as two-dimensional—self vs. other, sameness vs. difference—and lacking in originality. Either scripted by society, biologically rooted, or discursively upheld, difference as such forecloses the range of individual expression and/or the impact of individual non-conformity to these competing—and certainly politically urgent—definitions of identity. Furthermore, these positions require that identity itself be one of two: male vs. female, black vs. white, heterosexual vs. homosexual....theories of difference rely on the either/or model. Or, in the case of mixed-race people, neither/nor. (Hunter 302)

Although current understandings of binary difference are problematic and limit possibility for identities of mixed race, binaries, as Werner Sollors has suggested, may present the opportunity for "an interracial realm of 'neither, nor, *both*, and *in-between*'" (*Neither* 10, emphasis added). Dualities are not inherently problematic or limiting; rather, the problem lies in the prevalent insistence on viewing dualities as inherently oppositional and hierarchical instead of complementary and self-constituting. When dualities are viewed as components within the inevitable play of identity, their equal

presence becomes a necessary criterion, rather than a debilitating battle, for individual identity. Hunter also argues:

> To position a mixed-race woman in relation to *another* mixed-race woman...emphasizes the limitations of binaristic theories of difference which rely on negation and subordination. . . . In these formulations, what is deemed normative is white, heterosexual, and male. Since Birdie and Cole's *difference from each other* undoes our traditional notions of difference in which a normative standard oppresses its corresponding deviant, difference here is no longer tyrannically hierarchical, nor it is oppositional. (304)

However correct her analysis, I must also emphasize that Hunter pinpoints the non-hierarchical, non-oppositional difference *here*, solely in the relationship between Birdie and Cole or between those of mixed race. Indeed, the text itself seems to suggest that the only space conducive to this type of difference *is* such a relationship between two individuals who see each other as each one wants to see herself—secure within an identity of affirmation of the entire being rather than negation of one or more components.[17] For the text only demonstrates this difference between Birdie and Cole and presumably among the group with which Birdie finds Cole at the end of the novel. In every other situation the novel depicts—from Birdie's days at the Black Power school to her days at the women's commune to her life among rural New Hampshire whites—Birdie must struggle with questions of difference, with performing blackness while in a white body or performing whiteness while loving and longing for her black father and mixed raced but more black-identified sister. The text's struggle over the possibility of a racially utopian space and its limited scope is clear; yet the text also

[17] The text does isolate these relationships between those of mixed race or mixed cultural experience. For instance, Samantha—the black girl adopted into a white family and white community—is able to see Birdie's blackness in addition to her whiteness while black individuals without similarly dominating multicultural experiences must be told that Birdie is black—as when Cole defends Birdie's blackness with the children at the Black Power school.

acknowledges, through its tropes of mobility and travel, that even individuals who have glimpsed this utopian space must still exist and move about in a world that is far from utopian. As Birdie asserts, "I had started in motion, would stay in motion until I hit the truth or a wall, whichever came first" (377). The space existing between those of mixed race is not the only space those individuals enter. Thus, such a space only "frees" those who can occupy it, and, because they can only occupy it in relation to each other, they cannot experience such freedom in relationships with those who are not mixed race. This space offers the possibility of revolution but, in doing so, it simultaneously draws around itself tight borders crossable by only a select few.

Of course, the challenge lies creating spaces where differences are respected among larger, more diverse groups of people. A simultaneous challenge lies in putting into practice refusals of hierarchy and opposition and of embracing dualities as complements; these are challenges for which the text longs but does not successfully illustrate. In none of Birdie's travels does she encounter a space of communal racial harmony where she is simultaneously allowed internal racial harmony. Even at Aurora, the women's commune, Birdie must pass as white; although she is free to explore her sexuality and to acknowledge her interest in same-sex relationships, she is not jointly freed to acknowledge her blackness;[18] it must remain invisible because of her mother's insistence that she pass. Thus, the invisibility of Birdie's blackness is necessitated in the text as the result of an unspecified threat that appears more imagined than real, the result

[18] Although *Caucasia* allows Birdie to explore relationships with white partners, it dismisses the same-sex relationship, privileging instead Birdie's relationship with a white boy because it is heterosexual. In many texts featuring multiracial women, heterosexual romance with a black man is prioritized, suggesting that a multiracial woman's black "side" is the only one that makes her a woman. This, of course, is a strange twist from historical notions that black women's blackness excluded them from the category of women altogether.

of Sandy's paranoia rather than a true persecutor. Yet even in this respect, the text demonstrates the lived effects of the racial "wars," even when the wars are being waged most directly in the individual's mind. Thus, these wars, both real and imagined, result in the perpetuation of conflict and opposition, in negations and erasures that seem the only course for survival. Although the text does suggest the existence of a space beyond these wars, it shows the tenuous nature of such spaces—Birdie and Cole's childhood paradise, which the text shows cannot be maintained outside their attic walls or even in the presence of their parents, and Cole's community of friends at the end of the novel. This latter space is also seen as tenuous since, at the novel's conclusion, Birdie again steps into the larger world, albeit only momentarily, and witnesses the blurred and fleeting image of another mixed raced girl. In fact, the text leaves Birdie's identity in confusion through her reading of the girl she sees:

> It was a cinnamon-skinned girl with her hair in braids. She was black like me, a mixed girl,[19] and she was watching me from behind the dirty glass. For a second I thought I was somewhere familiar and she was a girl I already knew. I began to lift my hand, but stopped, remembering where I was and what I had already found. Then the bus lurched forward, and the face was gone with it, just a blur of yellow and black in motion. (413)

The text begins and ends with mixed raced faces, reiterating the longing for visibility and recognition and suggesting that even though Birdie has found the object of her travels, the longing and the motion will not end as long as she must enter the world outside her sister's utopian circle. Although Birdie may have a temporary illusion of familiarity (read "family" in this word's root) in this outer world, she finds it and the people who occupy it unfamiliar in the end. This world, then, does not contain the family she has sought. Thus,

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[19] The assertion of both blackness and mixture here shows the text's struggle to include both blackness and whiteness rather than conform to hypodescent. The girl Birdie sees is not described as "black" but rather as "black like [Birdie]," which can be read as black mixed with white.

the text once again confines the utopian space of belonging and family within a small domestic frame, suggesting that mixed raced individuals may not find similar spaces where they will be visible and recognized in the public sphere; instead, they will continue to remain in motion, moving in and out of a clear line of vision.

Reappearing beyond Recognition

Caucasia, like other novels of mixed race, follows in the wake of the tragic mulatto tradition within mixed raced literature and alludes to the possibility of tragedy, demise, and disappearance; nevertheless, this novel, along with most of the texts under discussion here, also moves beyond traditional tropes of tragedy in seeking spaces where mixed race identity may be recognized and affirmed. Metaphors of mixed race identity in *Caucasia*—those of visibility and invisibility, mobility and belonging, power and recognition—involve visions of psychological utopia, and at this metaphorical level, Birdie's psychological longings are offered as parallels for social longings as well. Birdie's self represents the nation, and the utopia sought by the text involves the social "liberation [of individuals, in this case, those of mixed race] through the liberation of their inner selves" (Pietikainen 42). This utopia involves the possibility of spaces in which the mixed race individual is free to be and is accepted as herself. Within *Caucasia*, liberation of the true self involves Birdie's escape from the confines of Jesse's identity—suggesting that those of mixed race need to free themselves from the fictions of passing—and a more difficult liberation from the tensions of race relations, which have been internalized in the lives of mixed race individuals.

Important, however, is the understanding implicit in *Caucasia* that various selves—Birdie and Jesse, for example—and various races—in this case, black and

white—are present within the mixed race individual and that her identity must be inclusive of these various self-constituting parts. As Michele Hunter notes, "disappearing is not the solution. The universe of *Caucasia* insists on the recognition of mixed-raced women" (307). It would be reductive to argue that Birdie embodies the protagonist's "true" identity while Jesse represents an identity performance, for both function as extensions of who the protagonist claims to be; as Senna notes, "In traditional literature of passing, the protagonist was always thought to be authentically black because of her one drop of black blood. The idea of passing relied on the notion that there was an authentic racial self that one was concealing. With Birdie, her authentic racial self is only what she makes it" (Arias 448).

With this seeming freedom associated with mixed race, however, also comes the insecurity of having an undefined or indeterminate self. Although this state is liberating in some contexts, it can also distance the individual from a core *sense* of self. Such an understanding of self asserts that there is a primary core within the individual that exists before or outside of performance. Of course, postmodern theories have encouraged us to imagine that there is no self, no identity outside construction and performativity.[20] Still, the meridian between two poles is a location one occupies at a given point in space and time, giving at least the illusion that the individual is singular, perhaps only in the way that an orange is singular as it unites the differentiated segments within its skin. It is useful, then, to postulate the existence of a self that holds in union one's inherent differences, a self that appears to the individual to be an "authentic" vision: "Admittedly,

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[20] Homi Bhabha argues, "What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*, 'opening out', remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference . . . where difference is neither One nor the Other but *something else besides, in-between*" (219).

the sense of authenticity referred to here is itself a construction, but one each of us creates, owns, and celebrates" (King x). Individuals often do maintain the *sense* of an authentic self, but this self is often challenged by social definitions that rely on signs upon the body and calculations of ancestry. The text demonstrates that bodies become prey to body fictions that attempt to impose identity based on superficial signs. These body fictions ignore internal definitions one has for her own identity in favor of external applications, producing "overwhelming confrontations that act out violence against the mind and spirit of the individual whose body is gazed upon" (King ix). As demonstrated through *Caucasia*, these body fictions are capable of colonizing the mind and spirit, subjecting the individual to psychological and social torment and even destruction: initially, Birdie's performance as Jesse begins as a ruse, a strategy enacted to ensure her safety, even a game of fantasy. Over time, however, Birdie's body fictions work with her performance as Jesse to murder the self she had been: " I wondered . . . if I too would forever be fleeing in the dark, abandoning parts of myself that I no longer wanted, in search of some part that had escaped me. Killing one girl in order to let the other one free" (289). The text confronts the dangers of body fictions, of performances that shadow other portions of one's authentic self, of performativity that threatens one's assumed ontology, of social strictures that undermine identities; in so doing, it suggests the possibility of and longing for spaces where authentic selves may be recognized and affirmed, where utopian notions of harmony and wholeness may be realized.

According to Senna, "Cole represents this intimate space outside of the constructs of identity" (Arias 448), suggesting the possibility of sites in which the enactment of authentic identity is possible. This idea of authenticity alludes to a psychological utopia

in which individuals of mixed race may be able to accept themselves and be accepted as mixed race or even accepted beyond the notion of race, in which one's authentic self is not forced to disappear. In order to attain this state, the text maintains, individuals must foster relationships with others who will see them as they see themselves—Birdie, for example, must recapture the relationship she and Cole shared as children, where, presumably, they recognized each other without the outside world's markers of race. Although the "pursuit of a better way of being does not always involve the alteration of external conditions, but may mean the pursuance of spiritual or psychological states" (Levitas 192), for those of mixed race, the pursuance of the desired psychological and social state requires altered external conditions since these conditions often have compromised the individual's vision of her authentic self.

Herein lies an additional challenge, for the text also makes clear that the individual's authentic self can remain visible *only* when she is known through intimate relationships or what Michele Hunter terms

> *passionate recognition*. For to recognize means to admit the validity of, that is, to confirm another's legitimacy; to recall knowledge of, that is, to validate the memory of a shared experience; to perceive clearly; to admit as being one entitled to be heard; to acknowledge with a show of approval or appreciation; to acknowledge the independence of; and, to acknowledge an acquaintance with, that is, to recognize an existing relationship. (309)

Yet within the public world, which of course is not utopia, bodies will lend themselves to erasure and to body fictions and social forces will interpellate individuals in ways that may conflict with their visions of themselves. Even the notion that mixed race individuals who are strangers can recognize each other in a crowd is not a sufficient, or reliable, way

for one's "true self" to be recognized consistently in the larger world.[21] As mentioned earlier, in the final image of the text, Birdie recognizes another mixed girl who passes by in a school bus. Although her initial response is to connect with this girl by waving to her, Birdie does not, "remembering where I was and what I had already found" (413). Importantly, although passionate recognition seems to exist, it is not acted upon. Thus, in the world outside of intimate relationships, where passionate recognition has yet to be practiced uniformly, the strongest defense against invisibility is one's internal commitment to enacting constantly one's authentic self, regardless of recognition by others and regardless of the body's betrayals. The strongest defense against invisibility, then, is passionate recognition of one's self, with its concomitant resistance to erasure in the public world.

As a condition forced upon the powerless by the powerful, upon the seen by the seer, erasure must be resisted. It, unlike invisibility, does not hold the potential for power. As Senna argues, "invisibility only has power when you disrupt it in some way, by speaking out, airing dirty laundry, disrupting comfort zones. Taking notes" (Arias 450). The text demonstrates that the power of Birdie's invisibility is forsaken when she sacrifices Birdie's life for Jesse's; only when she attempts to use her invisibility to disrupt the racial status quo is she potentially powerful. As I have argued, although Birdie's invisibility holds the potential for power, not all invisibility does so. The invisibility I describe at the beginning of this chapter was not a source of power for me but of

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[21] A repeated trope in literature by those of mixed race insists that these individuals can recognize multiraciality in others who share it and, through this recognition, can know these others immediately and intimately. Consider the words of Rebecca Walker, who writes: "I would meet these young mixed-blood people, and I'd always look at them and feel like we knew each other. We recognized something similar, but there was no story underneath, no way to really access it. I wanted a space where we could be everything or all of who we are" (quoted in Hunter 297).

diminishment, of powerlessness. It was invisibility that, on the one hand, attempted to sever interpersonal ties and, on the other, attempted to sever me from my skin. In each instance, the viewer attempted to reconstruct the world through her and his own preferences, none of which accommodated my reality. This powerless invisibility, this erasure, is projected onto those of mixed race each time they are forced to deny any part of their heritage and/or their identity as they see it. When individuals whose sense of identity lies in multiracialism are categorized as black or white exclusively, invisibility is forced upon them. In this position of invisibility, their reality may be denied—as my marriage to my husband was denied by the sales clerk and as my skin color was denied by the police officer. Clearly, this position of invisibility is not restricted to those of mixed heritage alone; critical analysis by countless men and women of color has long documented their subjection to erasure. Additionally, invisibility is not restricted to race but can be influenced by gender, class, sexuality, etc. In each of these instances, however, the position of invisibility is one forced upon those in positions of restricted power by those in positions of power.[22] And in every instance, being placed under erasure restricts not only the reality but also the rights of individuals.

The passionate recognition of which Hunter writes relies on the "productive value of difference" (309), wherein *all* differences are beyond hierarchy and opposition, for the relationship between Birdie and Cole "models what it would take for any one of us to know ourselves and each other outside of the protocols of race, class, gender, sexuality, and/or nationality" (309). *All* difference *is* difference; the truth is not simply that *I* am different from my white mother, my white former husband, my black father, the white

[22] We must not forget, of course, the invisibility of whiteness, which functions as a *source* of power, rather than a diminishment of it.

sales clerk and the white police officer but also that *they* are different from *me* and from *each other*. White patriarchal supremacy creates a false norm through homogenization and essentialism, making whiteness the standard and blackness substandard. However, as Homi Bhabha writes, there exists a space that "constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew" (37). Read anew, the true norm may be recognized as difference as multifaceted as individuals are, and this norm can be difference beyond possibility of hierarchy and opposition. The norm can become difference that is not only visible but also *re-envisioned*. Such a vision of difference is reflected in both the social and literary imagination at the end of the twentieth century; however, earlier crystallizations of race and gender continue to problematize these re-visions of difference, as the next chapter's analysis of Jenoyne Adams' *Resurrecting Mingus* shows.

CHAPTER 6
HOME LIFE: CONFLICTED DOMESTICITY IN JENOYNE ADAMS'S *RESURRECTING MINGUS*

Home Bound

"You two don't have *kids*, do you?"

This was asked, I always speculate, with the slight grimace of those who are forced to imagine something they find disgusting or incomprehensible, in that efficient way that allows someone to inquire and pass judgment in one swift and unmistakable remark, a remark that bears the clear imprint of the figuratively up-turned nose.

My former husband's reply—"Not yet, but we will"—was equally efficient, conveying our unwavering intention to form our family as we desired in the face of silent opposition or voiced hostility. I'm not entirely sure when he learned to stand unflinchingly and proudly with his choices before the gales of public opinion. But I think, now that I am just beginning to *know* my mother, that I must have learned it before I was born…

When my grandmother learned my mother was pregnant with me, a child conceived with a black man, she said, "That's just like you. Always trying to break down barriers." Gram said this because she knew my mother—rebellious and prone to taking the left fork whenever she was directed to the right (or vice versa). Of course, my grandmother was not implying that my biracial heritage was something to be frowned upon, only that my mother's inner promptings so often directed her to challenge conventions in any way possible.

And so Mom had me, one of "those kids" that the anonymous woman above must have found so unappealing or pitiful or (dare I say it?) tragic. I always found it ironic when people with no intimate knowledge or experience of the subject claimed that my husband and I should "consider the children." A common argument is that interracial relationships are fine but realities will limit the potential for happiness and belonging in any children born of those relationships. I reply to such arguments that, as one of those children, the most limiting factors in my life have been just such accusations; my greatest hardship has been simply the assumption that my racial heritage will bring me hardship. I have struggled, not with my racial heritage, but with others' assumptions regarding that heritage. Individuals attempt to force their ideologies upon my lived experience, never hearing the fact that during my childhood I was embraced by love and belonging, never hearing the fact that I have not regretted or felt inhibited or conflicted by my mixed racial heritage. Indeed, I am not confused; I am simply met with confusion.

Because of this, I have realized that the "what about the children?" protest from whites really has little to nothing to do with the children. The protest is less about the potential child's identity and well-being and more about the questioner's own discomfort with the idea of diminished white racial "purity" and power. This fear does not concern the child's self-esteem but the questioner's estimation that whiteness must remain singular and sacred. Given that the interrogator already knew I am of mixed parentage when she disparaged our willingness to have children, her distaste was clearly not about the well-being of those children. Instead, her distaste was a reflection of her own discomfort in disruptions of the status quo and her own desire to maintain traditional

notions of race, specifically whiteness.[1] For, as Richard Dyer attests, "Inter-racial heterosexuality threatens the power of whiteness because it breaks the legitimation of whiteness with reference to the white body" (25).

Of course, during periods of heightened racial pride among African-Americans—such as the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Nationalist Movement of the 1970s—the imperative of preserving racial purity was pervasive among black communities. Although the assumption of hypodescent had preserved communal bonds among all who had black forebears, nationalist ideologies admonished individuals to "stay black" and to recognize "black is beautiful." Still, as discussed within the context of *Oreo*, these nationalist ideologies—especially those of the Black Nationalist Movement—were rife with contradictions regarding sexuality and racial mixture. Black men's involvement with white women often went overlooked during the Black Nationalist Movement; conversely, such involvement was sometimes encouraged as a way to enact revenge against the sexual oppression of black women by white men—which often was really a revenge against the historical erasure of black masculinity and denial of patriarchal power to black men. Black women, however, were typically encouraged to build the black nation by reproducing with black men, although Elaine Brown has noted that nationalist women were expected to sometimes engage in sexual relationships with white men if necessary to benefit the movement.

Thus, black responses to interracial sexuality have been complex, reflecting the ambiguities resulting from historical ideologies of hypodescent and the nationalist

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[1] An easy escape for whites from this dilemma regarding children of mixed race already born is the perpetuation of the one-drop rule: "That interracial child cannot harm my sense of self and my sense of whiteness if I and society deny the possibility of 'interracialism' and insist the child is black." Many African-Americans also find value in the one-drop rule and hypodescent but typically do so in order to maintain social bonds and political coalition.

ideologies of furthering the aims of the race. White dissatisfaction with interracial reproduction, however, is often an expression of fear regarding the sanctity and maintenance of whiteness. As Dorothy Roberts's and Rachel F. Moran's studies have demonstrated, recent court decisions involving mishaps in fertility services and recent decisions regarding adoptions illustrate that "valuable" reproduction is still tied to race. This fact offers interesting considerations for discussions of interracial intimacy and interracial families. And since racial reproduction is often intimately tied to notions of female racial purity, mixed race women and their "ambiguous bodies" provide insights into the reproduction of race. Caroline Streeter argues: "control of what the ambiguous body of the black/white woman shall signify is crucial to the continued coherence of race as ideology" (307). Likewise, struggle over the meaning of the ambiguous body can problematize the racial identification of the individual herself.

Furthermore, dissatisfaction with interracial reproduction constitutes a value judgment, not necessarily on the life chances of the child, but on the basic rights of individuals. Clearly, "The right to bear children goes to the heart of what it means to be human. The value we place on individuals determines whether we see them as entitled to perpetuate themselves in their children" (Roberts, Dorothy 305). My former husband's value was diminished in his questioner's eyes because he had not assumed his "place" as patriarch of a traditional white family. My value was likely already diminished in her eyes, whether she viewed me as a black or a mixed race woman. Had either of us been with traditional partners, her view of our reproduction would likely have been different.[2]

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[2] Of course, this woman would likely have supported reproduction within white families to a greater degree than that within black families. In fact, her views on black people's reproduction might very well have reflected Dorothy Roberts's estimation on the general view. According to Roberts, "In the American market, a Black baby is indisputably an inferior product" (271).

The respect (or lack thereof) shown to non-traditional families and individuals of diverse heritages does, indeed, reflect the value placed on them as human beings. Although it is not necessary that these families and individuals have the respect and approval of strangers—so long as they have the same liberties—the views of others will likely affect their sense of themselves. When families are not recognized as legitimate, they are forced to contend with assumptions, misunderstandings, and even hostilities that legitimated families avoid. As illustrated through the analysis of *Caucasia* in the previous chapter, when social forces deny families and individuals a sense of "rightness," these families and individuals must work to affirm their own rightness, belonging, and wholeness—for some, a daunting task. In keeping with historical patterns and with social privileging of the heterosexual family, many authors explore these issues of family and domesticity through the genre of romance fiction. Even black and mixed raced women, who historically were denied access to normalized families, often imagine family and identity through the formula of romance, which provides fertile soil for cultivating questions regarding the reproduction of race, color, and gender. In the discussion that follows, I analyze Jenoyne Adams's novel *Resurrecting Mingus* because it offers a fictive imagining of raced and gendered questions of domesticity and family and because it illustrates the ways in which racial mixture de-legitimizes families according to social norms. The novel, like others within the romance genre, constructs identities as bound (linked) to home and family and constructs individuals as home(ward) bound in the quest to identify themselves—that is, individuals in these texts often return to their points of origin, to their histories, in order to understand who they are. Thus, metaphors of homes and domesticity proliferate in this text, as it imagines the importance of a utopian familial

space of belonging and safety and as it negotiates the desire for a body that can contain elements society deems should tear one asunder.[3]

Published in 2001 in the wake of the much-publicized 2000 census, *Resurrecting Mingus* is framed in the African-American romance genre, which shares similarities with the romance genre as it is generally categorized. As Janice Radway has noted in her study of romance novels published in the 1980's, "few of the books . . . advance the truly radical suggestions that women do not need men to define themselves or to be happy, that they might be able to operate in the public world on their own just as men do" (220). Although more recently published texts may more strongly assert the possibility of women's autonomy, many still isolate a woman's identity and value through her heterosexual relationships with men. Romance novels written by black women occupy a complex position in their negotiation of romance, families, and women's autonomy. Since black women were denied categorization as women during slavery and the Cult of True Womanhood and black families were denied the stability and structure of the white patriarchal norm, issues of domesticity and family differ historically between black and white women, who have occupied markedly different positions in social and domestic spheres. For women writing romance, these historical realities—in which African-American women had to fight for both their autonomy and the recognition of their womanhood—influence imaginings of family, domesticity, romantic relationships, and women's autonomy. Despite significant differences in the historical positioning of black and white women in domestic and public realms, contemporary romances written by both

[3] I do not wish to suggest that individuals are simply their bodies or that identity can be located succinctly there. However, I do recognize that bodies are racialized and gendered—not through biology and blood but through metaphor—and thereby become points of reference for many as they seek to articulate identities. Likewise, although the "self" is not the body, we look to bodies as representatives, vehicles, and houses of the self.

black and white authors appear to prioritize heterosexual relationships as the path to women's fulfillment. However, novels such as Terry McMillan's widely popular *Waiting to Exhale* challenge these priorities by validating bonding among women as similarly (even equally?) important. This bonding between black women as "sisters" is common, even within novels in which some women are able to fulfill the primary desire of heterosexual romance. Thus, although the romance genre privileges heterosexual relationships, many popular novels by black women assert the importance of sister love in addition to utopian longings for romantic love.

Resurrecting Mingus, however, struggles in its negotiation of relationships, both romantic and familial. Although it works within the romance frame and attempts to privilege heterosexual romantic relationships as the path to its protagonist's fulfillment, it nevertheless demonstrates tensions and contradictions between its surface and unconscious messages regarding women's autonomy, familial relationships and the desire for sister love. Significantly, its romantic frame puts the text at odds with its theme of self-realization and its desire to show women as capable of autonomy. However, the narrative frame and the particular nexus of spatial metaphors throughout the novel, in this case metaphors of home and the domestic, link this text to the romance genre and to historical constructions of women's identities, a link that allows an exploration of the inter-workings of gender and race in mixed race identity. *Resurrecting Mingus* uses the issue of mixed race heritage and domestic metaphors to deal with questions regarding women's autonomy, belonging, and desire for intimate relationships, but it struggles with the nature of those relationships, displacing its longing for sibling intimacy—which is an intimacy that mirrors the self—onto heterosexual romance. The novel's metaphors,

additionally, exhibit tensions regarding the role of the domestic and romantic within negotiations of racial and gender identity. The text's use of homes and the domestic realm suggests a desire for familial acceptance as well as self-acceptance—being "at home" with oneself—and for identities that do not ignore familial and romantic relationships. Like other texts dealing with mixed race, *Resurrecting Mingus* exhibits utopian longings for the internal security of families as well as for the external security that would free non-traditional families from public pressures. And like other romance novels, it identifies heterosexual romance as a utopia in which women's desires may be fulfilled and their identities validated.

Divided Houses

Consistent images associated with mixed race identity appear as tropes in the literature of those of mixed race—who, through social insistence on hypodescent, have been grouped historically with the minority race, have been forced to deny certain parts of their ancestry, and have been expected to struggle over identity issues. As noted throughout this study, recurring metaphors of the mixed individual include quester, seeker of utopia, one without a space of belonging and one who comprises the space of warring blood. Through an analysis of African-American women's writing, Maude Hines discusses the use of the "metaphor of the body as container [that] illustrates the confinement created by social pressure to deny multiplicity" (46). Although Hines cites literature that critiques containment for its denial of multiplicity, literature dealing with mixed race often deals with the quest for a confine that can allow multiplicity.[4] As I have

[4] Of course, much literature dealing with issues of mixed race acknowledges that containment—in social definitions, for example—often denies multiplicity. This literature, then, holds many parallels with the literature by African-American women that Hines studies. Yet literature on mixed race also suggests a

suggested, in literature by women of mixed race heritage and literature containing mixed race characters, metaphors of homes and the domestic sphere proliferate. These metaphors, like those discussed in previous chapters, depict a longing for utopia in the domestic and familial realm—a longing consistent with the romance genre in which *Resurrecting Mingus* is framed. While the utopian longings are more self-reflexive and aware of their limitations in *Caucasia*, in *Mingus* they are much more unconscious. The text seeks spaces of belonging and acceptance for its protagonist, both within the family of origin and within romantic relationships, yet it does not acknowledge how these personal struggles manifest larger political struggles in which mixed race individuals and groups seek utopian spaces of acceptance and affirmation. Nor does the text acknowledge the extent to which historical forces have brought about current personal and political crises surrounding race. Although the "present is a site contested by past and future histories, 'now' being a composite of the traces of the past and the anticipants of the future present in our contemporary mode of production" (Roberts, Adam 28), *Resurrecting Mingus* ignores these traces of past and future within the current moment, offering instead limited (and limiting) metaphors that long for utopia within the personal and romantic realm.

It is not surprising, then, that in *Resurrecting Mingus* metaphors of the domestic—tropes of houses and homes—and the familial are abundant, suggesting the need for a racial identity that can contain dualities and for a site of belonging in which non-traditional families can find safety from silent opposition and voiced hostility. Moreover, the novel's frame within the romantic genre is in keeping with discourses of

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longing for "containers," be they bodies or homes that can accommodate multiplicitous and dichotomous characteristics.

mixed race identity that seek to locate a space of belonging for the individual through romantic relationships. The novel relates the stories of Mingus, a black/white mixed race woman in her late twenties, her older sister Eva, their Caucasian mother Elaine (known to the daughters as M'Dea) and their African-American father Carl. The protagonist's struggle is to reconcile her lifelong desire for a family in which she feels belonging with the reality of her actual family: her parents' impending divorce is precipitated by her father's infidelity and feelings of having been trapped within the domestic realm by Elaine's initial pregnancy. Elaine searches for an identity separate from her life as wife, mother, and homemaker in the wake of Carl's infidelity. Eva struggles with the burdens of colorism and alcoholism, and Mingus attempts to define her own identity in relation to this family in which she has been a friend to her father, a stranger to her mother, and an enemy to her sister.

Following cultural expectations that marriage and motherhood are women's path to belonging, wholeness, and a secure identity, Mingus simultaneously seeks to define her identity through attempts to create her own nuclear family with various men. Mingus is a fictive representation of the common longing among women to create, through her own body, a being who will show her unconditional love and acceptance and who will offer her a mirror of herself—similar to the mirror Birdie and Cole provide for each other in *Caucasia*.[5] Mingus is depicted desiring someone who will allow her a re-visioning of herself and her space of belonging and hoping that the creation of a child will allow a re-creation of herself through that child's eyes. Mingus also, however, longs for a healthy relationship with her sister to such a degree that the text unconsciously suggests this

[5] In stating that this longing is common, I am not suggesting that it is natural or innate. Rather, because women's identities historically have been linked with reproduction, many women still seek identification and affirmation through this means.

relationship is the one in which harmony and intimacy would be most vital. A healthy relationship between two sisters, the text asserts, would allow the mixed race woman a sense of home and belonging; a mirroring relationship like that between Birdie and Cole in *Caucasia* allows, to use again Michele Hunter's term, passionate recognition. Although *Resurrecting Mingus* is explicit about its protagonist's longing for a true sister, it elides the significance and prominence of this longing, which runs as an undercurrent throughout the text and makes the protagonist's struggles to find intimacy in other relationships even more displaced. In many ways, *Mingus* is a less sophisticated text than *Caucasia*, and it often does not find its mark; in this case, it ignores its own suggestion that intimacy between sisters—two individuals who are the same through their differences—is the intimacy for which it most longs. Mingus is left, instead, struggling to create a home for herself through heterosexual romance when the most valued site of belonging might be attained through the mirror of an intimate sibling relationship.

Like many other contemporary African-American novels within the romance genre, *Resurrecting Mingus* prioritizes heterosexual love while attempting to allow women's autonomy. This shift toward individuality and autonomy, however, produces another tension with the romantic frame as it has developed historically; within the romance genre, the aim traditionally has been marriage between a woman and a man wherein the woman willingly relinquishes some of her autonomy in favor of the security and protection the man offers. However, since the first romance by an African-American author featuring African-American characters was published in 1980,[6] the genre of African-American romance often has problematized the traditional formula of sacrificed

[6] See Gwendolyn Osborne's article "How black romance—novels, that is—came to be," *Black Issues Book Review* v. 4 no 1 (Jan./Feb. 2002) p. 50.

female independence for security through dependence upon a man. The extraordinarily popular works by Terry McMillan, for example, attempt to disrupt the typical romance formula by "creating narrative spaces where Black families are in crisis, where conflict is not always resolved, where the fissures of contemporary existence are not denied, and finally, where self-reliance abides with nurturing interdependence" (Ellerby 107). Following this reconfiguration of the traditional romance, *Mingus* struggles to find a balance between female autonomy and secure partnership, to identify the mechanisms of interdependence. Such attempts to marry romance with self-realization are common in current African-American fiction. As many feminist ideals become increasingly incorporated into popular culture, the traditional patterns of romance and romantic fiction evolve to reflect more current ideologies. Furthermore, as contemporary narratives seek to move beyond the historical norms of the patriarchal white middle class in order to illustrate more accurately diverse lifestyles and communities, spaces become open for authors such as McMillan and Adams to challenge traditional notions of family, intimacy, and women's autonomy.

Although current ideologies often work to allow women space outside the domestic realm, romance fiction still relies on tropes of family and domesticity in working through the intricacies of women's lives. Of course, these narratives reflect a culture that continues to link the domestic sphere with women, despite advances women have gained in the public sphere and despite many men's more active involvement in the domestic. In Adams's text, the domestic realm is used not only to explore issues of gender but also to explore issues of race and mixed race. One of Mingus's early journal entries includes a biblical quotation that exemplifies a familial and psychic state common

to those of mixed race, alluding to and continuing the trope of the tragic mulatto: "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand" (188). In terms of gender and family, the quotation functions as a call for harmony, whether that harmony be based upon traditional gender roles or more contemporary roles that favor interdependence rather than patriarchal domination. In terms of race and mixed race, we typically might read this quotation as advocating harmony among races or solely in reference to the expected conflict within individuals of mixed race. However, the text draws parallels between the life of the individual and the life of the familial. Thus, the quotation references Mingus's literal family as well as the house her body comprises for her sense of self and is in keeping with the use of domestic metaphors within the novel. This fictive family, due to its mixed race status, falls prey to external pressures that threaten its stability and health, resulting in a disjuncture between the mixed race individual and social expectations. As Mingus decides, it is not white mothers who are anomalies, but brown daughters. Later, Elaine understands that what Mingus "really wanted was normalcy, a life without so many complications" (197). Mingus's childhood drawing of "The Perfect Family" in which she colors her mother brown also illustrates the mixed race individual's clear view of the racial difference of her own family. However, the text makes clear that external forces are the impetus for this realization of difference and that external pressures, rather than non-traditional families, are the problem.

Indeed, the novel attempts to negotiate responses of mixed race families facing social pressures that become too much to bear; as Carl begins to tell Elaine, "Racism's not dead. . . . If I can live the rest of my life with less of it [by being with a black woman

instead of a white] . . . " (121). Carl is unable to finish his statement because Elaine, who has never believed in the debilitating pressures of society, interrupts him. Social forces that limit African-American patriarchy are ignored by Elaine but are still depicted as the eroding force destroying the marriage; Elaine and Carl's split represents the demise of non-traditional families and also prefigures the mixed race individual's recognition of her own divided self. Mingus's initial denial of her parents' marital problems parallels a lack of investigation into identity problems that have become the stereotypic norm for those of mixed race.

These identity problems stem from long-standing assumptions that two races are at war within the mixed race individual. These races, deemed oppositional and hierarchical by prevailing ideologies, are thought to exist in conflict within the individual as well as within the larger society. A reconciliation of such opposing forces and the quest for healing the conflict assumed within mixed race identity is figured in the text, as mentioned earlier, in metaphors of house and home. These metaphors are, of course, common in the writing of many women, yet the mixed race imaginings of house and home often focus on metaphors of division, disjunction, lack of unity, and utopian longings for sites of reconciliation. Mingus is depicted as a mixed race woman still confined within limited understandings of herself, understandings that are based, not upon recognition of her whole self, but upon social assumptions that she must feel conflict due to her family of origin and that her best response is to identify as black. Reflecting the lived reality of many mixed race individuals, Mingus functions in the world as a black woman but privately dwells on the importance of her white mother to her racial identity. Mingus speaks clearly the need for her mother to live her own

"authentic" life when she states, "This house is dead. And you can't live your life for a house or for a family that's not here" (14). However, she is depicted living her life in the way she warns her mother against: on the surface, she is a successful and independent black woman, yet the text consciously illustrates that her inner world is dominated by identity questions and the search for a family not yet created; she engages in romantic relationships in an effort to secure for herself a utopian place of belonging and intimate relationships in which she is securely accepted. Unconsciously, the text struggles to articulate its true longing—for a sister who will offer the mixed race woman a mirror of herself; this longing, however, is at odds with the novel's romance genre, which consciously asserts the primacy of heterosexual love.

Contemporary romance struggles with questions of women's autonomy, racial and otherwise. Mingus's brief foray into a relationship with a white man does not satisfy the text's questions regarding mixed race identity; in fact, it exhibits the tensions of most texts that struggle to negotiate affective relationships within mixed race families. Only though romance with a black man, many texts assert, will the mixed race woman satisfy her racial conflict—only through relationship with a black man will she be a "real" black woman. Mingus's father is her first romantic partner, and Elaine describes Mingus as his mistress, continuing the historical associations between miscegenation and incest. Within the novel's frame, which privileges romantic relationships, processes of identification through the father-daughter relationship are necessarily problematized: the home of her father's new family is not a space in which Mingus can claim a sense of belonging for when Mingus visits the home of Carl's mistress, Glenda, she is out of place from the moment she steps through the door. She spends some time coloring with Glenda's son,

then learns that Glenda's baby, Sarah, is her father's child. The sense of self engendered through the father-daughter relationship becomes a tenuous basis for identification as Mingus is displaced as her father's favored daughter. As she rushes from the house, Mingus tells her father, "You were all I had. M'Dea has Eva. Now you have Sarah. I'm just—I'm leaving" (184).

Of course, the text will not allow this particular romance between father and daughter to satisfy its longings for domesticity, family, and racial belonging, nor, as I've mentioned, will it allow Mingus's relationship with a white man to suffice. Instead, as Mingus's future partner Eric suggests upon his introduction to her, she needs to "try loving a brother" in order to avoid looking "elsewhere for what [she] should be getting at home" (40). Explicitly, then, the text locates the home of the mixed race woman in a relationship with a black man. Thus, Eric's house appears to be a space of comfort and healing. Through its description, it is depicted as an "authentic" space—i.e., natural and unpretentious: "a cabin-style house with rustic wood shingles and palm-size rocks built into the lower three feet of the front wall" (85). Yet, inside it is both elaborate and empty; it is subtly indicative of wealth and physical luxury and at the same time bare and selectively furnished. Although it is a space of various comforts, it is also a site of tensions and doubt. This domestic space on which the protagonist holds no claim becomes a site of false security and temporary retreat. Mingus admits to herself that she "wanted to close her eyes tight and wrap herself up in [Eric]. He made her feel safe" (96). But this safety and comfort is fleeting; as demonstrated by her feelings of doubt and insecurity in his home, Mingus's sense of belonging in relationship to Eric is unstable and easily disrupted.

The stark décor of Eric's house parallels the illusory ease Mingus can gain from her relationship with him and, by extension, the temporary stability engendered by seeking identity through romantic relationships. The choice of romantic partners by mixed race individuals often is viewed as an alignment based on racial identification; that is, those who select white partners may be viewed as seeking or privileging a white identity, while those with black partners may be viewed as choosing a black identity. Eric's home, like the romantic relationship, is not a space in which Mingus may find an unalterable sense of belonging or acceptance; it is not a space in which she may satisfy questions of racial and gender identity. Instead, the space is depicted as one where Mingus must wonder about other women who've come before her; when she awakes from her first night there, she hears Eric speaking with a woman—his young, attractive cook, who appears irritated with Mingus's presence and with the fact that Eric will be having dinner at Mingus's house. While turning to romantic relationships as utopian sites to engender racial harmony within the mixed raced individual, the text simultaneously problematizes romantic relationships as too unstable a context in which to find one's racial balance. Additionally, concurrent with the text's assertion that mixed race women return home through romance with black men is the text's problematizing of black male fidelity; both Carl and Eric have affairs that end their primary relationships. The question offered, then, is how the mixed race woman may find her racial identity through heterosexual romance with a black man when black male fidelity is consistently undermined.

As *Resurrecting Mingus* both privileges romantic relationships and suggests the uneasy sense of identity gained through romance, it simultaneously affirms the validity

and essentialness of familial identification. The text asserts that the individual's divided sense of self is manifested because of social pressures that seek to divide families of origin, allowing Mingus to illustrate the trope of tragic mulatto—conflicted over her identity and ancestry. Claiming blackness through a denial of whiteness—whether as manifestation of the one-drop rule or as practical, emotional, or political maneuvering—Mingus also illustrates a longing for whiteness, represented by her mother. Reflecting on the surface that which has been criticized historically—mixed race individuals' longing for whiteness and devaluing of blackness—the text nevertheless contends that such longing may be more personal and familial than political and racial. That is, the longing for whiteness may have less to do with a longing for privilege and power than it does with a longing to validate personal affiliations and life-sustaining relationships. As the text shies away from the overtly political implications of mixed race, it prioritizes the personal and familial, suggesting that questions and conflicts within the mixed race individual may result from desires to align with others based more on affect than political ideology. As she writes in a poem directed to her mother, Mingus feels "stuck outside your womb / trying to get back in" (124). Mingus's subtle conflicts with race are representative of many mixed race struggles due to pressures to choose one parent, and the text turns briefly to both father-daughter and mother-daughter relationships as possible answers to its questions of racial identity and identification. Each relationship, however, becomes part of a binary that effectively polarizes the mixed race individual, perpetuating notions of conflict. Acknowledging the pressure to choose between parents, Mingus tells her mother, "It's like I can't love the both of you the same. Somebody always has to be loved more. And somebody always has to get their feelings

hurt or the other one isn't happy" (8). Thus it is that Mingus writes of her mother, "I keep you hidden . . . / You are in me / Your name written across my wrists / in umbilical cord dust..." (124). Yet because of the overarching presence of race within the text, the dilemma Mingus recalls reflects more than the oppositional pull between parents; it reflects the pull of affiliation between races that society dictates as oppositional.

Cracking the Mirror

The divide illustrated between Mingus and each parent is racialized, making clear that Mingus's mother represents the other, albeit unclaimed, race within her: "Mingus had always felt more black than white. But there was something about what Eric said [in making light of her white mother's existence] that unnerved her. Like he was denying that a part of her existed" (159). The distance between Mingus with her white mother represents Mingus's distance from whiteness and her affiliation with blackness.[7] The text is not consistent, however, in its parallels between racial identification and parental closeness. Eva, who *is* able to connect with M'Dea, nevertheless is represented as black within the text. Simultaneously, though, Eva is allowed to question the insistence that she is black through her questioning of Mingus: "Is that what you think...Do you think you're more black than white?" (115). Eva's puzzled questioning suggests that this is not her own understanding of her identity, that she may not think of herself as more black than white. She does admit that she has tried, unsuccessfully, to be a "white girl with black skin" and that her life would have been easier if their mother had married a white man (115); when Mingus asks Eva if she wishes she were white, Eva replies: "I wish I

[7] Mingus's black identification is problematized at various points in the novel when she explicitly states that she is mixed, that she has a white mother whom she cannot vilify, etc. These conflicts reveal common themes of confusion within mixed race identity as well as the effects of a novel that struggles to remain clear about its theories.

had a job. White skin would make it that much easier" (115). In this instance, the social and economic implications of race are made clear: the desire for whiteness is not always a desire for power as it is commonly understood or a longing for closer familial relationships; instead, this desire for whiteness is a desire for personal security. In Eva's case, the security sought is economic during her adulthood and romantic during her adolescence when she uses bleaching cream to compete with lighter-skinned girls in garnering boys' attention. Although the text is clear in its insistence that Eva is not a white girl with black skin, it is not explicit in revealing her identification as exclusively black, leaving open the possibility of mixed race identities.

In questioning the relationship between parental affiliation and racial identification, the novel pertinently illustrates Mingus's sense of rejection by her mother. Additionally, the parents are characterized as unable to offer equal love for their two daughters, and the daughters are shown in the grip of racialized conflicts over this fact. Eva struggles with the effects of racism and colorism, which seem to be the root causes of her hatred of Mingus, who is lighter in color. Not only is Eva depicted as darker, she is also depicted struggling with that darkness, as when she uses bleaching cream in an attempt to lighten her face. Mingus catches her sister using the cream and tells their mother, who had expressly forbidden Eva to use it on her face, and M'Dea is strangely understanding when "Eva rushed to M'Dea and hugged her tightly. Told her how the Richardson girls got all the attention from the boys because they were lighter-skinned like Mingus" (66). Instead of punishing her, M'Dea consoles Eva and sends Mingus to her room for the rest of the night. Thus, the tension between Mingus and Eva is more

than sibling rivalry; their conflict is shown to stem from color consciousness and jealousy on Eva's part.

Additionally, this color consciousness is depicted as something that affects the girls' relationships—romantic and otherwise—with men. Mingus holds their father's approval and confidence throughout their childhood, giving her the acknowledgement and acceptance by a black man that is a recurrent desire in texts with mixed race women. As M'Dea narrates, "Mingus was his first mistress. That's the irony of bringing female children into an unsettled relationship. A kind of competition occurs. Not just between sisters, but between all of the women in the household" (59). In the case of Mingus and Eva, the competition becomes colorized. Although Eva attempts to lighten her face and draws closer to her mother, she ultimately adopts stereotypes of blackness in speech and attire. The text also exhibits tension surrounding the lived effects of the sisters' different colors: Mingus is a successful lawyer, while Eva is an alcoholic without a steady job, and no explanation other than the implications of the color hierarchy is offered for this difference.

This hierarchy affects not only opportunities for material success but also romantic success. The novel allows Mingus to achieve an engagement to Eric, while it depicts Eva without a romantic partner. Her attempt to have an affair with Mingus's fiancé reads as a product of rivalry and an attempt to alleviate Eva's own sense of disconnection and inadequacy; Eva's revelation of the affair also functions to denounce Mingus's tenuous sense of security and belittle her success: "Maybe he's been having an affair with your sister," Eva posits. "Maybe that's why he proposed. So by the time the shit hit the fan he'd have you hooked. But you probably don't want to hear that, huh?

Let's just ignore it and concentrate on poor alcoholic Eva. Poor, poor confused Eva" (205). Of course, Eva is depicted as poor, alcoholic, and confused. At the same time, however, the text shows Mingus similarly—confused, deserving of pity, and searching for consolation. Mingus's consolation comes not from a bottle, as does Eva's, but from the arms of men—initially her father and then her romantic partners. However, her longing begins with her childhood estrangement from Eva, although Mingus "couldn't figure out what Eva saw in her back then that made her hate her so much" (7). Referencing her mother's anxiety over the race of Carl's mistress, Mingus states, "Color doesn't matter..." (13), but it clearly does. Carl seeks a black woman in order that his life be simplified; Mingus ends a budding relationship with a white man in order to begin one with a black man; and Eva hates her sister because she envies her lighter color, which she believes translates into more security (romantic and economic) in a world obsessed with whiteness.

The source of Mingus's longing for acceptance and belonging is embedded in her relationship with her family, specifically her sister. As children, "Mingus would lie in the center of the bed, arms outstretched, and Eva would jump as high and as close to Mingus as possible without hitting her...Never once did Eva hit her. Mingus missed that. The security of knowing she could trust Eva" (21). However, when Eva was ten she suddenly stopped wanting to play their game and convinced their parents to give her a room of her own. "For her eleventh birthday [Eva] got a new bedroom set, and for the first time, Mingus realized she hated sleeping alone" (22). Thus, Mingus's fear of being alone is initiated in the childhood moment when Eva refuses to sleep with her anymore. Subsequently, when her parents argue late at night and when she begins to realize the rift

in their marriage, Mingus has no mirror in which to find consolation and affirm a sense of belonging; the mirror Eva provided as someone who might experience the world as Mingus does is cracked by the rivalry of colorism, leaving Mingus to search elsewhere for security, acceptance, and a sense of identity.

The means offered for the mixed race woman to appease her sense of isolation, to stabilize her sense of belonging, and to acknowledge her sense of identity—namely, relationships with men—are demonstrably inadequate. Neither her relationship with her father nor her subsequent relationships with romantic partners fill the void resulting from Mingus's estrangement from Eva. The text's romantic genre, of course, necessitates these romantic means through which a woman presumably finds security, belonging, and validation. This genre is not equipped to satisfy the more pressing longing for sister love that the text exhibits. The tension between the romantic frame and the text's longing to re-establish connection between sisters remains unresolved. Through Mingus and Eva's conflicted relationship, though, the text illustrates the effects of the color caste system on lives and relationships, allowing no one to escape the effects of color and race consciousness. It uses these motifs in addition to domestic metaphors to confront issues of autonomy and dependence, belonging and refusals of belonging, intimacy and isolation, although it displaces the longing for resolution of these issues onto romantic relationships.

Resurrecting Mingus attempts to negotiate the longing for racial harmony within mixed race individuals through the medium of replication—which, within the frame of the romance genre, appears possible only through heterosexual romance and the re-enforcement of the nuclear family. The text must struggle, then, with its unconscious and

seemingly anti-romantic desire for a sister, a more accurate mirror of the self; thus, the text's stronger desire is one that its romantic framework cannot encompass. The longing for family ties and domesticity, according to the romance genre, is fulfilled only through heterosexual love. The racial politics of the text must work in reference to a history that denied, through long-standing anti-miscegenation laws, marital and familial bonds to those heterosexual lovers of differing races and denied, during slavery, those same bonds among African-Americans. The frame of the text offers romance as the utopia to satisfy desires for family and domesticity, which are, in turn, seen as the solutions to questions regarding racial identity and belonging.

Mingus's struggle to define herself in terms of race and in terms of womanhood are consolidated in her desire to have a child; thus, she is depicted taking the traditional path women have been allowed in defining their identities, a path that links a woman's identity with her body and its processes and with her relationships with men. However, this path is noticeably different from, even contradictory to, Mingus's professional life, where she is independent, self-determined, in control, and valued for her mind. Mingus's desire to have a child, then, reflects a desire to solidify gender as well as racial identity; it becomes a profound example of the common longing to create a domestic site of belonging through the forging of a family of one's own. Furthermore, it is indicative of a fear of being without an image against which to define oneself as well as indicative of the desire to replicate the self.[8] As I have suggested, this fear of being alone is depicted as stemming from the moment when Eva rejects Mingus and their sibling rivalry escalates;

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[8] This desire also demonstrates the link between the body and the psyche, specifically the attempt to come to terms with the psyche and one's identity through the body. Interestingly, many literary and autobiographical accounts of mixed race women demonstrate a sexualized use of their bodies throughout their processes of self-identification. See, for example, Rebecca Walker's *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self.*

Mingus's desire to replicate herself functions as a stand-in for the text's true desire—a replication of the self through the mirror of an intimate relationship with one who is the same because of shared difference.

Because of the genre in which this text is framed, the affect and longing Mingus feels for her sister are displaced onto normalized heterosexual relationships. Thus, this romance works against itself since its real desire is not for a man but for a sister who may offer a mirror for the mixed race woman and a relationship of acceptance and belonging. Within this novel, romance and family prove to *not* be the means whereby the mixed race woman successfully negotiates her racial and gender identity. Yet, in keeping with the romance genre, the novel also does not allow a woman's identity to revolve around her autonomy and prosperity in the public realm for, despite Mingus's career achievements, the novel still asserts that women's identities must encompass a successful heterosexual relationship. Since the novel unconsciously suggests that it is not heterosexual romance but sororal relationships in which women may negotiate their identities and find belonging, it is at odds with the formula of romance.

Resurrecting Mingus falters in this area where *Caucasia* more closely reaches its goal of locating a site of acceptance because the former longs for a reclamation of the sisters' relationship but must work from within its romantic frame and thereby refuse to prioritize sorority over heterosexual romance. *Mingus* fails in each attempt at "lateral" female bonding through its privileging of romance, which results in issues of colorism and rivalry between women it depicts as longing for sisterhood. Because of the imperative to achieve romantic success, sisters in the text become competitors in a game whose goal is to seek and capture a man. Where *Caucasia* recognizes the longing for

sister-mirror-self and highlights this relationship as utopian, *Mingus*—through its adherence to the romance genre—must seek utopia in heterosexual romance and displace this longing onto romantic longings for the other. The novel struggles with itself not only over what I've termed lateral bonding between women, but also with vertical bonding and mother love—both through the relationship for which Mingus longs with a child of her own and the relationship between Mingus and M'Dea.

Thus, the novel displaces its longing for sister love onto both heterosexual love and mother love, and the connection between Mingus's longings for a child, the loss of her sister's love, Eva's color-consciousness, and their sibling rivalry is made explicit in the novel when Eva returns a doll she had stolen from Mingus during their childhood. Unwrapping a box Eva gives to her, Mingus finds a "shiny brown porcelain face. Curly black hair" and she holds the doll "as if it were a real baby" (144). When they were children, "Eva wanted to take the doll to school with her for show-and-tell. Said that all her classmates had white dolls and she wanted to take Marilyn in. Eva had all white dolls too. Mingus knew that Eva would feel special being the only kid at show-and-tell with a black doll" (144). Although the doll is brown-skinned, it still is representative of a color Mingus has that Eva does not, a lack for which the latter feels envious. The text is not clear whether this episode occurs before or after Eva's skin-bleaching attempt, but it is clear that Eva returns the doll when she has replaced it with Eric as pawn in her rivalry with Mingus. Thus, the text links Eva's colorism, their sibling rivalry, and Mingus's longings, and it refuses to recognize its desire for sister love. Instead, the novel continually displaces this desire to reclaim lost love between sisters onto romantic love and longings for a nuclear family.

The book begins with Mingus's disappointment and sense of abandonment after her lover leaves her and she realizes she is not pregnant. And throughout the novel, Mingus's sense of aloneness and abandonment is figured with references to the emptiness she feels when her menstrual cycle begins, continual confirmation that she is not pregnant. "Every new emptiness she discovered inside herself made her desire for a child grow stronger" (57). Later in the novel, "A rumbling in the center of her abdomen split her body into two opposing halves. She was holding herself together with tears" (188). Although this quotation literally refers to Mingus's menstrual pain, it figuratively refers to the split sense of identity typically associated with individuals of mixed race. The text figures identity in terms of relationships and reproduction, depicting the longing for a birth, specifically the mixed race individual's own *re*birth—as suggested by the title, her resurrection. Mingus's desire to replicate herself becomes indicative of a need for belonging and acceptance so often accompanying discussions of mixed race; this desire is spoken by Elaine, who says, "[I] needed to see myself in someone. Someone who had my eyes and my nose, my hair. My skin. My smile. I needed to appear somewhere" (223). The text does not allow this vision of the self through replication via reproduction, nor does it allow, as *Caucasia* does, the relationship of its sisters to suffice; due to its romantic framing, it seeks this mirroring in other relationships that ultimately are, both figuratively and literally, unfruitful.

Not only are the protagonist's attempts to reproduce herself unsuccessful, so too are her attempts to find herself in other vertical relationships. Like other texts that address the theme of reconciling opposites within the mixed race individual, *Resurrecting Mingus* attempts this reconciliation through the child's relationship to her parents. Mingus's

mother, for example, in part symbolizes Mingus's Other. Because Mingus is depicted as a stranger to her mother due to her close relationship to her father, her subsequent bonding with her mother shows an embrace of the Other within her—other race and even other gender since Mingus has aligned herself with the traditionally masculine public world and longs for the traditionally feminine qualities of love, family, nurturing, sustenance, and power found in the domestic realm of which her mother is such a strong part. In contrast to Eva, who is closer to their mother, the text demonstrates that throughout her life Mingus has existed in closer relationship to her father, representative of her blackness. Common as black identification is for individuals of mixed race, the text exhibits a struggle regarding whether such identification is sufficient, at times reifying Mingus's black identification and at others demonstrating its limitations. At the end of the novel, Mingus's identification with blackness and her father is capsized through a dismissal of her father and a subsequent embrace of her mother. Her father asserts: "I can't keep Mingus attached to my hip bone forever...People fall, they always fall. The more you tend to depending on yourself, the less you fall with 'em. Mingus needs to learn that" (232). Although we may read Mingus's embrace of her mother as a simple reversal of the one-sided identification she had with her father, Carl's statement suggests that the mixed race individual must learn to depend on herself to define and assert her own identity. Blind identification with one side or the other of one's ancestry leads to an unstable dependence on the fallible. Instead of choosing sides, the text longs for a choice that would affirm the totality of mixed race; it longs for the mirror of acceptance Mingus and Eva could provide for each other, but it struggles with its prioritizing of romance and its adherence to the stereotype of conflict and opposition within the mixed race

individual. Just as the text overlooks the significance of lateral female bonding, it ultimately rejects the possibility of achieving the utopia it seeks through vertical female bonding, as neither M'Dea nor a child of Mingus and a black man could provide an adequate mirror for the mixed race woman, one who would represent, in Michele Hunter's words, *difference from difference.*

The problematic nature of this one-sided vertical identification is also made clear within the text through Mingus's relationship with her father. As with other texts containing mixed race women, the absent black father is prominent in *Resurrecting Mingus.* Although Mingus shares a close relationship with her father when she is a child, distance grows between them as Mingus matures, a distance necessitated by the privileging of heterosexual romance as the path to a site of belonging as well as by the incest taboo, which prohibits the father/daughter relationship from being that path. Carl's dissatisfaction with his marriage becomes overwhelming after his children are grown and he no longer has them to support. His infidelity is depicted as an act of unfaithfulness against his wife *and* his daughter; as I have noted, when Mingus learns that Carl has had another daughter, she knows her place as her father's confidant and favorite has been usurped. Although the novel offers a somewhat different image of black fatherhood than other texts since Carl remains in the household to support his family until his children are grown, he is still absent in his presence through overwork and neglect of Elaine and Eva. He has long been absent from Elaine since he felt trapped into marrying her, and he is essentially absent from Eva due to their distance from each other. Thus, the black father in this text has been present to only one member of the family: Mingus. Through her

recollections, readers are offered glimpses of Carl's "absence" from the family even while he remained a physical presence:

> Instead of sitting next to M'Dea, as he normally did, sometimes Carl would place himself next to Mingus. . . . As everyone else at the table dug into scalloped potatoes or chicken with homemade dumplings, Carl would crunch on seasoned pork rinds out of an oil-stained paper bag and wash them down with Coca-Cola in a thick-bottomed glass bottle. He was playing dirty and Mingus would feel sorry for her mother. Refusing M'Dea's food was like refusing her . . . (126)

This parallel between Elaine and food is prominent throughout the novel and is consistent with the use of domestic tropes to signify both racial longings and rejections and women's "place." As Elaine states, "I know now that there is power in the kitchen, that's why I've been drawn to it all these years. I can create myself over and over again in there. Bake myself into casseroles, fresh rosemary bread, a lemon cream pound cake. I can become everything I can't be anywhere else. So many forms of beautiful. Just like my mother used to do" (223). Problematic, though not inconsistent with historical representations, is this equation of women with food, which allows the notion that women, like food, are objects for male consumption; thus, the novel once again struggles with its articulation of female autonomy—Elaine's notion that she holds power—and its formulaic representations of women.

Despite this inherent struggle, the text is clear in its link between Elaine and food; thus, Carl's absence from the family and his marriage is clear in his boycotts of M'Dea's food as well as in his excessive work schedule and his lengthy excursions into his tool shed where he listens to jazz music, plays his saxophone, and imagines a life without his family. Although this novel allows the black father to remain financially responsible for his commitments to his family until his children are grown, it shows him as mentally and

often physically absent from them. Likewise, when he encounters trouble with his new family, his response is to flee: "I threw my things in the trunk. I just drove, catching speed, not wanting to stop. The windows rolled up tight, I tried to hear my inner voice above all the racket in my head. What am I, I thought" (152). What Carl is depicted as being is partially in keeping with images of black husbands and fathers as dwellers within multiple families who have the autonomy to abandon those families each time they feel the urge to re-imagine themselves. Although Carl has sought a new "black" family through his relationship with his mistress in an effort to have a simpler life as a black man, he remains consistent with other images of masculinity that depict men's identities as separate from their families and the domestic realm. Carl's true self, the text asserts, was the carefree lover of music and travel who was trapped in the domestic realm through Elaine's secretly planned pregnancy. Thus, in another formulaic vision, the text constructs women as devious schemers who must snare men into the domestic web; women in the text, even those with careers, must compete with each other to attain what is assumed to be their most important goal: a man. And men in this text, even those who are financially responsible for their families, are depicted as adulterers who ultimately long to escape the clutches of women altogether. In Mingus's first journal entry she calls her father a "Punk Ass Nigga," suggesting that readers should view Carl in light of common stereotypes of black masculinity that depict black men as selfish, unfaithful, untrustworthy, and unable to remain committed to and present in their families.

These images of Carl (and even Eric) as representative of black masculinity and paternity problematize the novel's metaphors of home and the domestic realm. Depicting conflict and instability, the images allow few positive associations with black men, black

fatherhood, or racially mixed families. In many ways the novel simply relies on common tropes of conflict and insecurity and uses its domestic metaphors to reference these tropes. In fact, the initial image of the Browning family home—subsequently M'Dea's house—is an illustration of the novel's use of the domestic to depict conflict and lack of belonging and security within mixed race identity. As the novel attempts to move toward a healing of this racial conflict within the individual, M'Dea's home becomes a space where Mingus can reconnect and reconcile with her mother, with the whiteness she had at times denied or only tentatively acknowledged. Still, this reconnection between Mingus and M'Dea is not enough to satisfy the former's longings for security and acceptance. The home remains a space that Mingus and Eva do not share—in fact, after their childhood, they are never depicted in M'Dea's house or M'Dea's presence at the same time. Just as Mingus's reconciliation with M'Dea does not heal her inner conflict, neither do her relationships with black men; the novel concludes with Mingus estranged from her father and postponing her engagement to Eric. Although the novel privileges heterosexual romance as the means through which mixed race women may reconcile their conflicts, it simultaneously problematizes the validity of seeking one's identity through relationship with the "Other"—be that other of another race, such as Elaine, or another gender, such as Eric.

The most sure possibility for finding a utopia of acceptance and belonging is suggested through the relationship of mixed race sisters, which acknowledges origins while remaining free of the conflict of one-sided racial identification. The novel's frame, however, will not allow such a relationship to suffice in lieu of romance, and this privileging of heterosexual romance results in colorism and sibling rivalry between the

sisters. Ultimately, sister love is rejected as a viable path to healing the conflict assumed to exist in mixed race identity although the text continues to recognize the importance of this mirror that would allow a reflection of self-love; as Mingus states on the novel's last pages, she needs to "Love myself. I've never done that. I've always relied on someone else to do it, even if they did it badly. I'd rather be with you than be with me and something's wrong with that…I'm afraid to be alone, Eric. I don't even like sleeping in a bed by myself—it shouldn't be this way…I have to make things right with myself" (240).

Resurrecting Mingus clearly struggles with traditional and non-traditional notions of gender and race, questioning whether and to what extent women of mixed race should rely on the domestic and public realms to define themselves. The text does not, however, completely resolve these tensions. Although Mingus ultimately removes herself from her romantic relationship and, we assume, her efforts to have a child, her struggle to "love herself" is left open-ended, suggesting the route to identity cannot be through romance or maternity; instead, it suggests that individual identity must be a precursor to romantic and maternal relationships. Although the text may shift its prioritizing of heterosexual romance as the *means* whereby a mixed race woman locates her identity, it continues to elevate heterosexual romance as the *end* of her efforts. The last lines of the novel reflect that love between a man and woman still is privileged:

> "So it's over?"
> "For now, yes," her voice was barely a whisper.
> Tears dropped from his eyes onto his jeans. "Not forever, right?"
> Mingus didn't answer. Just held his hand as tightly as he held hers and hoped. (241)

Coming Home

Resurrecting Mingus is a useful text for exploring the construction of mixed race and gender identity at this historical moment when we might assume more allowance is made for women to define themselves outside the traditional realm of the domestic sphere. Yet because the text uses the metaphors of house and home to suggest a space of belonging for the mixed race individual, both literally a domestic space of familial acceptance as well as a figurative space of internal reconciliation, it is representative of other discourses of mixed race identity. Indeed, such discourses rely on domestic metaphors since parallels have been drawn historically between mixed race individuals and outcasts or those without homes. A literary survey reveals countless stories in which the mixed individual is depicted as tragic mulatto, existing between two worlds and with a home in neither. Metaphors of mixed race identity as *home*, then, suggest a desire for spaces of belonging and acceptance for the whole individual, spaces that have been unavailable to most who are mixed race. The spaces that have been available—within the black community, through acceptance of the one-drop rule or ideologies of political and social solidarity, and within the white community, through passing—do not typically include sites of belonging for mixed race individuals *as* mixed race. Metaphors of home in *Resurrecting Mingus* reflect a longing for a site of belonging wherein the mixed individual may be accepted—for example, the site that might be comprised between two mixed race sisters who share origins and present struggles. These domestic metaphors and the text's desire for sister love offer the additional possibility that spaces of belonging may be created through new visions of family and community, freed from the

racial and gender tensions that force antagonism within families and offering new points of reference on maps of identity that locate family not through race but through affect.

Because the idea of family and love is central to *Resurrecting Mingus*, its frame within the romance genre is not surprising. Its unconscious longings, however—which seek to locate women's identities through the relationship of sisters—place the text at odds with this romantic frame, which maintains social assumptions that women function in relation to men and through romantic relationships can find their identities. The use of the romance genre and domestic metaphors is appropriate, for mixed race identity is figured in this text as extremely personal, intrinsic, a matter of selfhood. As it is presented in Adams's text, mixed race identity is political only insofar as the personal is political, yet the text does not explore the political ramifications of personal lives; identity is presented in terms of the individual, the family, and the local community. Mixed race identity is depicted as having real-life consequences on matters of personal liberty and happiness such as romantic relationships, childhood friendships, one's sense of safety and autonomy in the community, and one's sense of possibility in achieving the "American" dream. For example, the fact that Mingus's family does not correspond with the normalized family type makes the realization of goals more challenging. Even though Carl works in real estate, because he is a black man he cannot search with Elaine for homes in certain neighborhoods. Instead, Elaine must scout the houses alone and return in the dark with Carl to show him what she has found. Discrimination in housing is common with regard to minority families of any race(s), yet Adams's text makes clear that Mingus's family faces distinct pressures because it is interracial. As Carl remarks to Elaine, "I gave up my dream—a normal black life, with a normal black wife and black

children. I just want to be like everybody else. Not have to put on shows or have my defenses up when I'm out with my wife. I get tired" (120). Carl's statement references the social pressures he and his family face, not because they are a minority family but because they are an interracial one.

Adams's depiction of mixed race identity as closely tied to the personal and familial is fitting since, in this historical moment, mixed race identity is increasingly negotiated through individualism. During the Civil Rights and Black Nationalist movements (and in texts that depict that era), individualism was commonly subsumed beneath a concern for the collectivity. As discussed in the previous chapter, in texts such as Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*, the individual concern of identity is largely implicated by external political factors that encourage people of African descent to form coalitions in the struggle against racist oppression. In the current era, pressing concerns with racial identity include much more individualized issues, as the popularity of African-American romance novels attests. Within discourses of mixed race, prominent issues are also individualized, such as the importance of one's family of origin and the role of family members in one's negotiation of identity. This is not to say, of course, that mixed race individuals' identities are not influenced by political concerns. As the debate over a multiracial classification on the U.S. census in 2000 attested, the question of how individuals should racially identify is not merely personal.

Resurrecting Mingus elides these overtly political dimensions of mixed race although it does struggle with the categorization of mixed race individuals; for the most part, the text suggests that both Mingus and her sister are black. However, the text does provide moments when it questions the one-drop rule, as when Mingus argues that hatred

of whites would include hatred of her own mother and, by extension, a part of herself. However, the text's destabilization of hypodescent is inconsistent; it may assert that mixed race individuals must reconcile the socially constructed dichotomies of race within themselves, but it doesn't suggest ways that actually threaten the categories of race. In fact, because the text assumes mixed race identity is a *personal* issue, because it overlooks the political dimensions of the personal, it poses little threat to social constructions and classifications of race.

Resurrecting Mingus struggles with the identities of mixed race individuals, vacillating between acceptance of the one-drop rule and acknowledgement of the importance of affect in defining racial identities. Like other texts dealing with mixed race, it exhibits a utopian longing for spaces in which mixed race individuals may find acceptance and belonging. Reflecting this longing, *Resurrecting Mingus* attempts to investigate the challenges of non-traditional families and the effects these challenges have on individual lives and negotiations of identity. Its domestic metaphors and romantic frame are in keeping with such concerns, yet the text is unsuccessful in pushing beyond the boundaries of this frame in order to allow female autonomy in the midst of intimacy; moreover, it privileges heterosexual intimacy over the other types of intimacy it explores, reinforcing traditional notions of which relationships should be considered most fulfilling for women.

Ultimately, a large problem with *Resurrecting Mingus* is that it offers no play whatsoever in the racial identities of mixed race people. Instead, from within its frame of popular romantic fiction and its basic alignment with hypodescent, the text attempts to articulate notions of harmony for mixed race women through privileging heterosexual

romance with black men. The novel reinforces many traditional notions of race, mixed race, and gender as it is unsuccessful in challenging the status quo in any forceful way. It remains in keeping with ideologies such as the one exhibited by the white woman in this chapter's opening anecdote, illustrating the presumed unavoidable and tragic struggles of mixed race individuals rather than remaining committed to the integrity and full recognition of these individuals and the families in which they find belonging.

CHAPTER 7
MERIDIANS ON THE MAP OF IDENTITY

Like most people, I'm often asked where I'm from. Having moved often throughout childhood, I have never felt as if one geographical location were "home." I like to give people, instead, a more postmodern response: I'm from every place I've ever been. Similarly, when faced with the question of race, I work hard to identify myself outside of the confines of U.S. racial categorization and through terms that more accurately reflect, if not typical notions of hypodescent, the ancestral lives that have shaped my own. So, when asked my race, I talk about my mother and also about my father, though I never knew him. I talk about my maternal grandmother who helped raise me. I talk about my large extended family. My notion of identity necessarily relies on affect more so than on the metaphors of difference we call race. Since our society revolves around categorizations and classifications, people continue to call me mixed, and responses to my so-called mixture vary. Some have felt pity for me and for others like me. Some, I am sure, have felt angry, although, according to my memory, I have been spared the awareness of this. Some have considered my mixture a sign of racial progress, a forecast of utopian racial harmony. The last time I met this response was at a recent event at a university women's center focusing on body image. As a woman and I discussed body image and the ways in which race shapes both representations of and responses to bodies, the discussion turned personal and our own bodies and racial heritages were brought into our theorizing. The woman used my mixed heritage to segue

into a discussion of race mixture as a sign of racial progress, as an indication that individuals—and therefore society—are more accepting of racial difference. Clearly, individual acceptance of race mixture cannot be unproblematically extrapolated into wide-scale social and institutional acceptance. Additionally, the notion that those of mixed race currently signal the dawning of racial harmony and an end to racism implies a certain novelty to race mixture, an implication that ignores the history of race interactions in the United States. In reality, race mixture is nothing new, nor are the varied—and very limited—responses to it.

Mixed race has long been a subject of inquiry—whether to imply the downfall of race based hierarchies, to support eugenicist notions of racial types and racial progress, or to assert the social construction of race. Recently, studies of mixed race have followed equally varied paths. Numerous autobiographies give accounts of living "on the color line" via mixed race heritage, and myriad studies investigate mixed race through the lenses of social science and psychology, whether contributing to the arguments on transracial adoption or exploring the identity challenges thought to accompany multiple heritages. Additionally, countless anthologies abound that investigate mixed race from sociological, political, psychological, legal, and literary perspectives, but there exist relatively few book-length studies of mixed race in literature. In *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both* (1997), Werner Sollors explores prominent themes that historically have been included in mixed race literature, from the Biblical curse of Ham and the close knitting of miscegenation and incest to passing and the tragic mulatto stereotype. Suzanne Bost's *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850-2000* (2003) offers a comparative analysis of the mixed race woman in the literature of the United

States and several Latin American countries that investigates "contemporary racial paradigms in the context of their precursors [to] show the historical contingency of these paradigms and [to] show how past theories prefigure or challenge post civil rights and postmodern theories" (11). Kathleen Pfeiffer, in *Race Passing and American Individualism* (2003), studies race passing—which typically assumes race mixing—in literature near the turn of the twentieth century to illustrate that, rather than proving shame and denial of blackness, literary representations of passing often show its consistency with notions of American individualism.

Unlike sociological studies of mixed race, my study acknowledges the ways in which literary texts both shape and are shaped by culture, and unlike many other literary investigations, this analysis acknowledges the themes of mixed race texts and also moves beyond a thematic study to look at the ways in which language use shapes social understanding of mixed race, which in turn affects constructions of race in general. Many studies, furthermore, reiterate the either/or dichotomy of mixed race by focusing too narrowly on these themes rather than extending the critique to look at the metaphorical ways mixed race is imagined, ways that—though included in narratives that deal with the realities of race conflict—clearly long for if not actively anticipate utopian spaces where mixed race may be understood outside of hierarchical opposition. My study looks at texts that attempt to move beyond conflict and an either/or choice, identifying the re-emergence of themes of unity, humanism, and nationalism that have proliferated in mixed race literature but that, at various historical moments, have been subsumed under the necessary demands of civil rights struggles that call for minority coalitions. Even during these periods however—including the Jim Crow era and the Civil Rights and Black

Power movements—certain authors—such as Jean Toomer and Fran Ross—confronted race and gender oppressions through the reality of mixture, which they used to highlight the illegitimate, often arbitrary, bases of racism and sexism. Of course, they were not alone in either these efforts or these eras. My study, then, also attempts to identify the relationship between these texts and the social and artistic spaces allowed within the moment of their production.

Paradoxically, race mixture both challenges and upholds traditional categories of race. Recent social rhetoric surrounding such mixture often denies the long-standing history of mixed race and the ways in which racism has been maintained through the control of interracial sexuality and the co-optation of mixed race people. Much of this rhetoric romanticizes race mixture by ignoring the past and encouraging utopian visions of the future. Mixed race, then, often functions in the social imagination as a false barometer of racial progress and a short-sighted predictor of the future of race. Within literary representations, however, the history of mixed race is often acknowledged even as texts grapple with the meanings of that history and the place it must have in future understandings of race. Thus, although the texts long to envision a racially utopian future in keeping with many social imaginings of mixed race, they struggle with past and present realities that have not allowed the fruition of these utopian longings. These tensions among historical realities, present longings, and future possibilities result in complex literary negotiations of mixed race.

The texts' historical contexts have facilitated certain "themes and literary strategies that often inform mixed race texts, including narratives of passing, formations of new racial space, multiple naming, redefining and challenging racial categories,

gendered racial crossings, grappling with the tragic mulatto, and the appearance of the tragic trickster" (Brennan 20). As my study has shown, certain historical moments have also given rise to mixed race literature that addresses themes of history and origins, ontology and performativity, movement and belonging, the role of bodies in identity formation, and the play within identity that may allow de-crystallizations of race and gender. Although analyses of mixed race literature have highlighted the traditional themes of conflict and tragedy, these analyses have not considered that much of this literature, especially recently, has searched for utopian spaces—personal, familial, communal, and national—through the articulation of meridian metaphors that emphasize unity and connection in lieu of opposition and hierarchy. As Jonathan Brennan asserts, "the literary text, poem or prose, the site for metaphor, is the act of language that encodes social meanings of race and mixed race and challenges them as well" (9). Thus, these metaphors encode and challenge imaginings of mixed race by positing sites of harmony and utopia while in the midst of disharmony and distopia in the socio-political realm, thereby constructing tensions between social realities and imagined possibilities. Indeed, the texts' utopian longings are problematized by their latent struggles with their historical contexts and generic constraints. The texts both attempt to shape and are shaped by the moments and formulas in which they are written, and these historical and generic restrictions are indicative of climates that work against the texts' imaginings of racial and gender harmony.

The basis of *Oreo* on Greek mythology, for instance, catapults the issue of mixed race beyond realism and into the realm of the fantastic and mythological. On one hand, use of such a formula could demonstrate that the issue of mixed race is universal and,

therefore, contains within itself elements that are transcultural and transhistorical. Use of this formula, furthermore, elevates mixed race to the symbolic realm and makes of it a short-hand to discuss larger issues of human nature and interaction. On the other hand, drawing parallels between discourses of mixed race and the mythological obscures the realities of mixed race individuals within a given historical moment and social location. It is difficult to imagine a mixed race woman during the Black Power Movement with as much room for fluid identification as Oreo when her story is taken out of the genre of myth and placed into that of realism. Likewise, the romance formula of *Resurrecting Mingus* restricts the possibilities for re-envisioning mixed race women's identities and relationships as the text simultaneously attempts to challenge racist and sexist assumptions about these women's lives.

Similar to the ways in which genre shapes and is in turn shaped by the literary text, there exists a reciprocal relationship between the text and its moment of production. The social space for discourses of mixed race would seem to have broadened in the mid to late twentieth century; the Civil Rights and multicultural movements in the latter half of the century appear to have facilitated greater acceptance of race mixing and mixed race individuals. Interestingly, discourses of mixed race and multiculturalism late in the twentieth century seem to have picked up the baton of unity within diversity that Toomer and others presented decades earlier. Such utopian ideals continue to fascinate those who are confronted with insurmountable difference, both outside of and within the body. In the face of modernization, many nineteenth and early twentieth century intellectuals sought to make sense of the apparent chaos and fragmentation they faced. Modernist anxieties in the early 1900s led intellectuals and artists such as Toomer, Zora Neale

Hurston, and José Vasconcelos to desire the unification of disparate entities under the banners of humanism and/or nationalism. These intellectuals functioned from differing social and political spaces and often toward differing ends, some encouraging unity through the demise of primitive cultures while still allowing the "gifts" of those cultures to benefit the nation as a whole. Others were motivated more by the experience of social misunderstanding, of finding themselves unable to fit into predetermined categories. The subject of mixed race, then, became a focus for questions of difference and challenges to reified notions of race.

Similarly, faced with millennial anxieties and the unforeseeable meanings race will assume, many late twentieth century intellectuals turn to discourses of mixed race—for the ideals of harmony and wholeness mixed race often supports, for the insulation between oppositional poles mixed race is thought to allow, and for the co-optation and containment of difference that celebration of mixed race often masks. As in the nineteenth century, many contemporary intellectuals use understandings of mixed race to challenge notions of race and difference, to highlight similarities, and to undermine the bases of racism. According to G. Reginald Daniel, "Although embodied in individuals, the new multiracial identity is perhaps best characterized as a cluster of new possibilities in the nation's collective racial consciousness that seeks to transform traditional racial categories and boundaries by expanding definitions of blackness and whiteness" (189). Certainly with the proliferation of postmodern theories into the mainstream, notions of mixture and hybridity have been popularized and celebrated within social discourse. Members of the mixed race movement have posited such mixture as the means to end racism, asserting that miscegenation problematizes any claims to

racial difference and could potentially move social understanding of difference beyond race. Such claims, of course, echo eugenicist notions earlier in the century that asserted race mixture would result in a universal human who would embody the best of both "types." Others hesitate to readily accept mixed race as a separate and distinct category, recognizing that notions of mixed race necessarily base themselves in theories of race; accepting mixed race, they argue, is parallel to earlier efforts in the United States and current efforts in other countries that used mixed race as a buffer to maintain hierarchies of whiteness and blackness. As David Parker and Miri Song summarize:

> Critics of the "post-racial" aspiration see it as naïve at best, at worst willfully dismissive of how anti-racist initiatives depend on the pragmatic recognition and monitoring of social outcomes along racialized lines. Amidst racial discrimination, hatred and violence, is it not premature to already proclaim the end of anti-racism and the arrival of a "post-racial" world? (12)

Indeed, the ideologies of "post-race" and "post-racism" that have accompanied late twentieth century discourses of mixed race obscure the social, political, and economic realities of racism as they still function in the United States. This trend, interestingly, coincides with efforts to dismantle affirmative action programs and reverse civil rights gains, a fact that problematizes assumptions that acceptance and celebration of mixed race naturally signals a decline in personal and institutional racism. On the contrary, as Suzanne Bost notes, the re-emergence of mixed race in public discourse may mask the ways in which race mixture is used to uphold racism and race-based hierarchies: "Both in the nineteenth century and in the 1990s, a rhetoric of confusion, tragedy, groundlessness, and futurism inflects popular representations of mixture. In both periods, fear and celebration work in tandem: the fascination with mixture corresponds to (and potentially masks) racist efforts to contain fluidity and to reinstitute categories" (185). Although

some celebrations of mixed race encourage utopian visions of social harmony, other discussions of mixed race hide anxieties about the distribution of power and the meanings and significance of race in the new millennium. Changes within the social imagination, though not necessarily within social reality, have allowed a climate that celebrates diverse heritages. Problematically, of course, this celebration often obscures the ways in which white supremacy and patriarchy still function to co-opt and oppress many of these diverse groups.

Thus, although notions of mixed race *do* challenge historical understandings of race, this challenge is neither new nor unproblematically celebratory, as some would have us believe. Recent interest in mixed race reflects tensions between celebration and anxiety. Facing not only a new century but also a new millennium, Americans again find it necessary to confront questions of history and origins and to attempt to deal with anxieties over the future of race. Race becomes a focal point for anxieties and is used to supplant other anxieties linked to change, uncertainty, and romantic nostalgia for an idealized past. As postmodern efforts deconstruct definitions of race, as demographic studies predict whites will be a minority in the U.S. by 2050, and as Americans assess social and political race progress over the century, discourse turns to questions of mixture in order to contain anxieties over an unknowable future. Suzanne Bost writes,

> Anxiety about the breakdown of racial categories has led to an increased interest in mixture. The rhetoric surrounding this new obsession often recalls that of an earlier American race drama, the anxiety surrounding racial definition that came with the abolition of slavery. Today, as in the nineteenth century, Americans are unsure about how race will matter in the future distribution of power. People of mixed race are targeted—studied, celebrated, or maligned—for challenging the terms of the debate. (185)

The terms of the debate have long relied on oppositional and hierarchical notions of race, and postmodern visions of race often acknowledge the ways in which mixed race both maintains and challenges these constructions. The late twentieth century texts that have been the main objects of study here are products of their postmodern era, concerned as they are with deconstructions and destabilizations of race and gender that attempt to acknowledge the history of race mixture. If we imagine the postmodern as "an attempt to think the present historically" (Jameson ix), then these texts' approaches to race and mixed race are in keeping with postmodern efforts and ideology as they attempt to negotiate the history of race mixture into present and future definitions of race. Additionally, the current insistence of much mixed race discourse on deconstructing race and allowing identification through multiple heritages—allowing what has historically been deemed contradiction—also reflects postmodern sensibilities. Yet modernism and postmodernism overlap or interweave themselves throughout what we linearly think of as time, refusing to allow easy categorization of texts such as Ross's *Oreo* or Senna's *Caucasia*. Undeniably, as Fredric Jameson notes, there is a "powerful alternative position that postmodernism is itself little more than one more stage of modernism proper (if not, indeed, of the even older romanticism); it may indeed be conceded that all the features of postmodernism...can be detected, full-blown, in this or that preceding modernism" (4). Ideological links between Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Jenoyne Adams's *Resurrecting Mingus*—two texts that initially seem too dissimilar for juxtaposition—suggest that the questions and concerns of modernism do, indeed, continue to warrant attention in what is called a postmodern age. Although long, Jameson's distinction between modernism and postmodernism is worth quoting at length:

> Postmodernism, postmodern consciousness, may then amount to not much more than theorizing its own condition of possibility, which consists primarily in the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications. Modernism also thought compulsively about the New and tried to watch its coming into being...but the postmodern looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same...for the shifts and irrevocable changes in the *representation* of things and of the way they change. The moderns were interested in what was likely to come of such changes and their general tendency: they thought about the thing itself, substantively, in Utopian or essential fashion. Postmodernism is more formal in that sense, and more "distracted," . . . it only clocks the variations themselves, and knows only too well that the contents are just images. In modernism...some residual zones of "nature" or "being," of the old, the older, the archaic, still exist. (ix)

Given Jameson's distinctions between the two, it would seem that the texts that have been studied here clearly illustrate modernist tendencies—through their concern with the results of shifts in racial definitions, with imagining a utopian space in which racial harmony and gender equity may be realized—as well as postmodern tendencies—through their attention to the ways in which race and gender are represented and the way such representations shift as notions of race and gender are deconstructed.

Based on my preceding analysis, it is clear that social anxieties regarding race and the bodies on which these anxieties are displaced have not changed significantly between Toomer's era and the new millennium as society continues to confront wide-scale shifts in industry, technology, demographics, and other realities of globalization, leading one to question both the extent of social progress and the categorization of social and literary periods. Nearly a century later, society still confronts many concerns that have been labeled as modernist even though we may have added new responses to our repertoire; we have not escaped modernity but have carried modernist problems and responses into the postmodern age, altering our context without significantly changing our concerns.

Society presents an illusion of progress—technological, social, even racial—without having met the demands that would allow present realities to correspond with these present representations. As the texts here illustrate, we continue to face challenges regarding race relations—including how to acknowledge the history of race within the present moment—and, as the texts also show, these challenges continue to be met with many of the same responses. These responses encompass part of what marks this group of texts as significant within their given eras: the struggle between their utopian ideologies and the social realities of their moment of production. These texts dealing with mixed race, more so than many others, are caught firmly in the middle of the pull within race relations between reality and representation, between real lives and the longing for social utopia.

The texts' utopian longings are clearly illustrated through their spatial metaphors of mixed race; simultaneously, these metaphors reflect the limitations imposed upon progressive visions of race and gender by social factors even as they attempt to decrystallize concepts of social race in the United States. My notion of decrystallization relies on the archetypal theory of C.G. Jung and uses his notion of 'crystallization' as a metaphor to discuss race. I use Jung because he, like Toomer and others in the early part of the twentieth century, sought to link the seemingly disparate notions of his time. Concerned with balancing opposites as necessary poles in any structure of duality, Jung theorized the 'sacred marriage' that would unite dualities as complements. This Jungian romance suggests the importance of uniting opposites in a sacred marriage that depends upon a relinquishment of hierarchy in favor of balance. Although this metaphor of marriage and the suggestion of balance imply the retention of duality, Jung's dualism,

being horizontal rather than vertical, merely suggests a continuum on a line of difference in which no part can claim more importance or worth than the others. This continuum allows for heterogeneity and multiplicity, rather than hierarchy and singularity. Alternatively, we might imagine Jung's sacred marriage not as a horizontal line but as an encompassing sphere, which suggests wholeness, multiplicity, the unlikelihood of hierarchy, and the room for play. Thus, although oppositions are inherent in Jungian theory, hierarchy is not. Furthermore, each end of the opposition is understood as essential in a balance, rather than in a way that implies one pole must conquer and dominate the other. Such a metaphor is consistent with recent discourse on mixed race identity. Like Jean Toomer at the beginning of the twentieth century, many mixed race people currently articulate their desire to identify based on recognition of their numerous heritages. Like Toomer, they resist identification based on hypodescent, and they also insist that broader identifications needn't prevent them from building coalitions with oppressed groups who share similar experiences negotiating the world.

These experiences may be understood through the metaphor of archetypes, which according to Jung are universal patterns of being and knowing that inform any attempt to understand or interact with the world. The form of an archetype "might perhaps be compared to the axial system of a crystal, which, as it were, preforms the crystalline structure in the mother liquid, although it has no material existence of its own" (Jung *CW9 I*, 79). Jung's idea of crystallization of archetypes becomes a useful metaphor for thinking about race. In the United States, notions of social race and social gender crystallize many understandings of difference, and mixed race often crystallizes into an oppositional difference; mixed race becomes, to use Rebecca Meacham's terms, the

"archetype of the opposite," neither black nor white but the crystallized opposition of the two. A more useful description—one more in keeping with the identities many mixed race people currently hope to articulate—might be "archetype of duality" since duality more easily implies complementarity, symmetry, the necessity of each part, and the ways in which these parts must "play" off of each other. This term, then, allows us to imagine difference—an archetypal reality—without hierarchy and without opposition (in the sense of conflict). Gendered ideas of race and raced ideas of gender are in essence being decrystallized through metaphors of mixed race that seek to present an archetype of duality, to understand racial and gender differences beyond hierarchy and opposition.

As my study illustrates, recent texts dealing with discourses of mixed race reflect tensions between the longing to privilege unity and create utopia and the confines of historical and present realities. These texts, nevertheless, respond to what appears as a celebratory social space by attempting to reassess mixed race identities and the possibilities that may be fostered by non-traditional visions of difference. The texts under discussion here are successful to varying degrees in articulating metaphors that recognize the play within identity and that resist the impulse to form hierarchies. The spatial metaphors of houses and homes in *Resurrecting Mingus*, of course, are both limiting and limited by traditional stereotypes of gender that restrict women's identities to the domestic and familial. Metaphors of paradise lost and psychological utopia in *Caucasia*, while allowing more mobility, still imply an ideal space in which identity could be fixed and, necessarily, play would cease. The text imagines a futile search for an ideal that never existed; a utopian "Mix-land" is juxtaposed against the "Caucasia" of reality and shown to be unreachable. *Oreo*'s metaphor of quest also encourages more mobility, but

its reference to a predetermined goal suggests an endpoint of stability, a space where the mixed race holy grail of identity—wholeness—will be captured. *Cane*, like the other texts under discussion, offers metaphors linked to, and therefore problematized by, a particular time and space; metaphors in *Cane* reflect eugenicist ideologies and anxieties regarding race mixture and the potential for racial progress. "The Blue Meridian," perhaps more than any other text discussed here, recognizes mobility and play and suggests a metaphor that attempts to abandon notions of conflict in favor of unity, to forego hierarchy and encourage complementarity.

Given the necessarily elusive nature of utopia, all of the texts under discussion here fail to reach what they're hoping for; they are unsuccessful in solving the problems of racial unrest, which becomes, in part, a struggle over history and how history might be incorporated into the present and into possibilities for the future. Toomer's work in *Cane* and "The Blue Meridian," both working decidedly against the grain, were destined to fail at their social moments when the forces of Jim Crow segregation necessitated political alliances based on race, a basis that Toomer rejected. The other texts, similarly, are implicated by the historical contexts in which they were written. These texts, being flawed first novels, are valuable through their flaws, indicative as these flaws are of the ways in which contemporary ideologies of race and gender are limited by historical and generic forces. Analysis of these texts in what Jonathan Brennan calls the "field of mixed race studies" aids in "developing a framework for the discussion of contemporary multiple identities and for the analysis of the historical development of these identities in a sociological and psychological framework" (Brennan 17). This field, if it may be defined as such, exhibits parallels with the black feminist critique of the women's

movement's push to organize around only one marker of identity; in other words, mixed race discourses problematize notions of hypodescent and question the possibilities for valuing equally several markers for identity.

Metaphors of mixed race in the texts under consideration here exhibit this push for broadened definitions of identity, for allowing individuals to map out the contours of their identities and identifications in ways that challenge the traditionally firm demarcations of race and that problematize oppositional, hierarchical notions of difference. These metaphors, which span the twentieth century, rely on utopian visions for social progress that are problematized by social realities, both those of the past as well as those of the present. Still, these metaphors attempt—with varying degrees of success—to suggest possibilities for greater racial and gender harmony in the future. Many of them portray mixed race individuals as meridians between black and white, between male and female, between past and future. Such mappings of mixed race as a meridian, as a metaphor for non-oppositional and non-hierarchical visions of difference, seek to provide the language necessary to move our reality closer to these utopian representations of it.

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Shane Willow Trudell received her doctorate in English at the University of Florida with an emphasis in twentieth century African-American literature and women's studies. Specific areas of research include race, mixed race, and gender in literature and culture, interracial romance, and the intersections of race and gender in discourses of mixed race. She has published scholarly work in *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* and a book review in *Feminist Teacher*. Currently, she works as a Professor of English at Florida Community College at Jacksonville and as an Adjunct Lecturer of African-American Studies at the University of Florida. In addition to issues of race, gender, peace, and diversity, Shane enjoys nature, fitness, travel, spirituality, and activism and would welcome conversations with people interested in these and other topics. She can be contacted at willowtru@hotmail.com.

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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